

## *The Wounded Hand*

*From a German Detective's Note Book*

ON the 22nd of May, 1875, I stood in our office, behind my desk, when our chief entered the room with a letter in his hand, and addressed me with an invitation to undertake the unravelling of a mystery which had baffled the local police at T. I consented, and departed for the scene of the crime which had been committed, much limited, however, as to the time I was allowed for spending on the case.

Two hundred and fifty-five thousand marks had been stolen from the widow of a well-connected man named Friedow. Her villa stood outside the gates of a small town, and the lost property consisted chiefly in coupons and such value, together with a little coin. Her habit was to keep all papers of importance, as well as money, in a chest of drawers beside her bed. Her sleeping-room was situated on the first floor, and had but one window, which looked out upon the yard. Her confidential friends had often advised Frau Friedow to keep her gold at least in some safer place, but she had always resisted such counsel, and put no faith in banks or bankers. As to a safe!—she had averred that if robbers did ever molest her, unless her trusty dog and her faithful Frederick, who was her factotum and the only male person upon her little property, could protect her, an iron box would avail little beyond perhaps delaying the thieves in laying hold of what they wanted.

On the night of the 7th of May the poor lady was suddenly awakened about twelve o'clock. Her room was illuminated. Before her bed stood a small, thin man, with a lantern in his left hand and a hatchet in his right.

In a rough, disguised voice he threatened to knock out her brains if she so much as ventured to utter a sound. The unfortunate Frau was already voiceless from alarm. This speech could scarcely make her more quiet, but she could use her eyes, and did so for the next few seconds while her visitors remained with her. She saw that the speakers wore black hose, a blue blouse, and a mask, and that two more men were busy in the background breaking open her chest of drawers. In the farthest back division, covered over by stockings, yarn and flax, lay a round tin case, in which she kept her movable treasures. She was just recovering herself sufficiently to begin thinking about risking her life by calling for help, when the smothered yelling of a dog was heard without. The thieves had found what they wanted, however, and sprang with it to the window, one sash of which was open. They threw themselves upon a ladder without, and descended to the ground, while the third man still kept guard beside the bed. Frau Friedow cried, "Help! Help!" with all her might. "You may scream as long as you like now," he muttered, turning away and following the others from the room.

Frederick appeared at this instant, having been awakened by the noise. He found the ladder still in its place, and below and just in time to save the life of the house-dog, which had been almost choked by a cord twisted round his neck fastening him to his kennel. The man-servant roused up the neighbors, but all pursuit then or later, by friends privately or by the police publicly, had been

in vain. Not the last clew had hitherto been obtained as to the identity of the house-breakers.

This was how the matter stood when I arrived at T. When I had privately communicated with the magistrates, my second visit was naturally paid to Frau Friedow, I sought everywhere for any special indications which might put me on the right track, but what I found was desperately little. Like those who had gone before me, I concluded that the robbery had, at any rate, been accomplished by persons well acquainted with the locality, as the entrance to the premises had been made by a small door in the yard, of the very existence of which many of the neighbors were unaware. The ladder made use of had been dragged out of a nook in which it had long lain concealed. A pane of glass had been smashed in the window of the bedroom to enable one of the assailants to slip back the bolt. A few footprints had been traced, but there was nothing remarkable about their appearance, and they had been lost at once upon the high road or street upon which the little courtyard opened.

One thing seemed certain amid the maze of perplexity; the house-breakers must be sought from among neighbors, servants, friends or relations. Now the neighbor theory, upon investigation, seemed utterly futile, and one glance at old Frederick was enough to make one dismiss all thoughts connected with the second term in the list. There remained the friends and relations in the habit of visiting at the villa. The widow had not the faintest suspicion of foul play in any of these; nevertheless, I made her describe and closely particularize them all to me. I took up half-a-dozen imaginary scents. I ran hither and thither. I telegraphed in various directions. I worked, in fact, in the sweat of my brow, but alas! The result was simply nothing, nothing, nothing. I never before had been so utterly puzzled and hopelessly at fault.

On the fourth day of my residence at T. I went again to the villa, where the widow greeted me with eyes full of expectation. "Frau Friedow," I said, "it seems to me hardly possible that you are without suspicion in every quarter. There must surely be some one or other on whom your mind has fixed, if it were but for a second. Confess it is so, and confide in me."

"I assure you I have not even a shadowy thought such as you describe," she replied, in a much disappointed tone.

"And has nothing more struck you about those men you saw in your room than you have already mentioned? One remembers things on due consideration which have been often overlooked before. Did you notice no peculiarity about any of the scoundrels—in the voice, for instance, the way of standing, the hands of him who held the axe? Had he on a ring? Did he look rough, like the others?"

"There was one little thing I may not have told before," she replied, slowly. "It was scarce worth telling. When the two fellows ran off down the ladder with my little case, the window slapped down as they disappeared. The third man pushed it up again to go after them, but in so doing I think he must have put his hand through the broken pane, and have hurt it with the glass, in his haste. I certainly heard him mutter to himself, as if he were in distress."

“Was there no trace of blood left?” I asked, anxiously.

“None whatever.”

I began my investigations anew, and this time with the doctor of the district. We got into a lively dissertation upon wounded hands and in particular upon hurts inflicted by glass. By degrees I acquired the to me very interesting fact that some three weeks since, when the medic was riding home to breakfast after an early call, a strange man had suddenly appeared in the middle of the highway, and had implored his help. He explained of having fallen upon a heap of glass. The doctor took out his pocket case of instruments and extracted five splinters from the inflamed palm. While he did so the patient whimpered like a woman.

“How was the fellow dressed?” I cried, breathlessly.

“A blue blouse and black underclothes, so far as I can recall.”

“Could you identify him?”

“Perhaps. His face made an impression on me, rather because it did not seem to match the clothing; and yet, now I think of it, I seem to see only an ordinary brow, nose and mouth. I fancy it was the set of the head on the shoulders which looked remarkable. Artisans and such folks usually look otherwise. That is all I can say. But what makes this matter interesting to you?”

“I believe your complaining patient to be the principal in the late robbery, concerning which I have come down here,” I replied, in a low voice. “Can you give me any idea as to what became of the man after you had done with him?”

The doctor looked at me in amazement. “I think he went towards Ems,” he replied.

I lost no time in going in the same direction. An old tree which forked at the top, and carried a bell in that division, stood on a height near the shore. Here, those who wanted to be ferried over the river must stop and ring for the boatman, whose house stood in a sheltered nook at hand. I shirked preliminaries, and made at once for the dwelling. Here I found a gigantic person, who declared herself the daughter and the ferryman, and the customary rower when, as now, her father was absent. I sought to gain the confidence of this damsel. “A friend of mine went over here, I think, not long since,” I said. “He was in great haste, being on his way to Holland in order to escape serving here in the army.”

The popular antipathy to the enforced military training loosened her tongue at once. “Yes!” yes!” she replied. “A young man in great haste did surely go over a little time back.”

“He wore a blue blouse and black hose?”

“Maybe; but it seems to me he had others with him, or of his party,”

“Very probably. Two others, I suppose?”

“This is how it was. One man came to me in the early dawning. I put him across. An hour or so later there came a second, and asked anxiously about the first. When I told him he was beyond, he seemed content enough, and followed. The third, your friend with the blouse, asked if he were the first that had wanted me that day. He asked me particularly about the two I had already rowed over, and then seemed right gay, and jumped into the boat himself.”

“Ah! One of the three carried a tin box?” I said, slipping a coin into my new acquaintance’s palm.

“I never noticed,” answered the girl. “But I saw that the third man carried a round bundle or parcel wrapped in a red handkerchief under his arm.”

“Did he give you a good reward for taking him over?”

“Nothing more than all the world—ten pfennigs.”

“With his right hand?”

“Why not?”

“Wasn’t his right hand tied up?”

“Not that I saw. I only know that he kept one hand in his pocket, whether the right or left I couldn’t say now.”

I could have embraced the tall ferry-woman, in spite of her forty summers and her uncertainty upon minor points. It was plain that the three ruffians, for better security, had separated, and that the last comer was the leader in and the chief benefiter by the crime which had been committed. During his confab with the doctor, no doubt he had hidden the spoils in some hedge. I was upon his track now.

But I had soon to cry “lost!” It was a grievous disappointment to me. Beyond Ems the clew was nowhere to be followed. I labored in vain in this neighborhood for days. I made friends with all sorts of people, letter-carriers, porters, waiters, and walked many a weary mile in the hot sun, but all to no purpose. I was baffled and wholly at fault, as much as I thought I never had a hint at all to follow.

Nine days had gone by since I had come to T. I turned into a beer-garden in the neighborhood of

the town one evening, and sat down near a well-lighted bowling-alley, in which about ten gentlemen were busy at a game. My seat was rather in the shade. I paid little attention to the players, but leaned my head upon my hand and reviewed the defeat I had sustained and the small estimation in which I should be held by my colleagues and chief at home, feeling altogether extremely out of humor. Suddenly an ill-thrown ball rolled almost to my feet.

“A miss—a miss,” shouted several voices together, while one cried, “Why, Bottcher, is your hand not even yet recovered? You are not complaining of it still?” I felt like a huntsman in a forest who sees the game at his gun’s end. I was on the alert that second. I lost no time in finding out Herr Bottcher’s antecedents. He was a merchant, one of the Frau Friedow’s connections, and an occasional visitor at her house. He was a continual guest at this place of entertainment. I brought the doctor here next evening, and set him to work stealthily considering my game. My discomfiture was great when he flatly refused to identify Herr Bottcher and his patient as one and the same person. They might be one, he confessed; but then—they might not.

If the medico turned rusty like this, it seemed to me utterly useless to bring hither the ferry-woman on a like errand. I must trust to myself alone. We officials have two methods of doing business of this sort. We use the long or short like according as either seems most likely to suit. I determined to try one after the other. In order to put Bottcher quite off the scent, I went now to the host of this house of entertainment and introduced myself to him as a Hamburg agent for the forbidden lotteries. I begged him to keep this close, but I saw very plainly by his face that he intended doing nothing of the sort. Next morning, to my great contentment, I found myself outwardly under the supervision of the town police, and generally regarded by the public as a shabby individual.

I, meantime, was as busy as ever, but it was little I discovered. Herr Bottcher was certainly not in good repute among his fellows. Nevertheless, I could hear of no particular difficulty into which he had fallen of late, although I did learn that he had, three weeks since, made a hasty journey. One little fact however, seemed to me of great worth. Herr Bottcher these times slept badly, and was wont to rise often by night and pace up and down the garden.

I lay lurking for two entire nights under bushes in this same plot; but during all [those] weary hours whoever did come to this place, Herr Bottcher did not, and in the garden I could find no trace of any hidden treasure, or any likelihood of such. I fell in a greater despair than before. What could I do? Upon one side my absolute certainty of having tracked my man; on the other, no earthly means of bringing home his guilt. If I only had even sufficient ground to demand a search through the rascal’s house; but I had not. One afternoon I was walking up and down my room considering, when the post brought me a brief but concise and decisive dispatch from my chief: “Return immediately, unless all matters are in train. Give up. Your presence here is necessary.”

This order was like a thunder-clap in my ears. My commanding officer was plainly displeased at my long delay. Should I simply throw the cards down, or venture all on one trick this same

evening, so as to be ready to depart to-morrow at furthest? I decided for the last alternative.

Twelve gentlemen sat in the town clubroom. My friend made one of them. To his great surprise, I sat down close to him, and began to talk a little. Presently our nearest neighbor stood up and departed, to my great joy. I bent over to Bottcher now, and whispered that I had a weighty matter to talk over with him.

“What may it be?” he inquired, calmly.

“You believe I am here as a lottery agent?”

He nodded.

“I am not, however. I have been sent here on detective business by the Prussian Police Office.” Herr Bottcher took the revelation significantly. On the instant he knew not how to compose his features. He first drew in his face as if wishing to look astonished, and then he tried to smooth away all but supreme indifference. After a second or two, during which I studied him as a serpent does its prey, he said, in a constrained tone:

“How does that concern me, pray, good sir?”

“You have heard of a Widow Friedow, from whom a large sum of money has been stolen? I have come here to hunt up the thief. I have got on the right track. You, I know, are related to her, and concerned in the property she possesses as a probable heir.

While I spoke thus I looked him straight in the eyes. They sparkled like those of an angry cat making ready to spring.

“And you will arrest me, I suppose?” he gasped, angrily.

I should have loved to take him by the throat then and there, shouting, “in the name of the law!” To this day I wonder how I restrained myself, but I did.

“How can you talk so! I exclaimed, calmly. “I only mean that you must help me to bring the criminal to justice, being, as you are, interested in the inheritance.”

“With all the pleasure in life,” he replied, heartily. “I will do what I can. But—what is it you want of me?”

“Early tomorrow I will come to you to consult over the matter, and we can then decide on our proceedings.”

Bottcher drew a long breath. “This is most unfortunate,” he exclaimed. “I have had an urgent

summons, and must start from T. before daybreak. Perhaps I may be obliged to leave this evening. I owe a heavy sum of money, and must appear personally to my creditor to demand further delay. I cannot wait." I could scarce restrain my joy. The game had run his head right into my lasso; only one pull now, and the knot was fast.

"Don't trouble," I said, quietly. "By-and-by will do for me. I shall be in T. for another week; when you come back will answer as well."

"All right: I expect to return in a couple of days, he exclaimed. "But stay, one question: Is Dr. Miding mixed up in this affair?"

"Do you know him?"

"By sight only."

"He will help me identify the criminal," I said, coolly looking full again into my companion's face, which took a horrible tint and expression now.

"Can he do so?"

"Certainly. He saw the man dressed like a laborer, the morning after the robbery was effected."

"Who was this ruffian?" Bottcher asked breathlessly.

"His name is—Ebbing—I think," I answered at haphazard.

"I don't know him," was the reply to this.

"I dare say," I said "he only comes here at times." I rose now, broke off our conversation with every appearance of confidence, and departed, having shaken Bottcher by the hand. I went stealthy to his house and waited. I had been there but about a quarter of an hour when a trap dashed up to the door. Bottcher sprang out of it, went inside for a few minutes, and then reappeared carrying something under his left arm. As he got upon one side of the vehicle, I jumped upon the other, and seized hold of my game. He made not the least resistance, but sat like one enchanted.

"Are those Frau Friedow's papers you have under your arm?" I inquired.

"Yes, they are," he replied.

I made the coachman take us where I could put the robber in safe keeping.

When a man is suddenly discovered in a crime, he is sure to commit some piece of folly. I had

reckoned upon this, and was not out in so doing. My game had literally walked into my hand, and I felt rewarded at last for all my trouble and disappointing delays.

Bottcher was sentenced to six years in the House of Correction. His coadjutors were not caught.

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*Denton Journal* [MD], April 4, 1879

*The Saint Paul* [MN] *Globe*, April 13, 1879

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