

A Judgment of God

CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERIOUS INTERVIEW.

ON the right bank of the Memel, near the town of Tilsit, is situated the estate of Turellen.

It had recently come into the possession of a wealthy old lady, the widow of the Count of Ruthenberg. This person lived exceedingly retired, associating but little with the families in the vicinity. She was, however, frequently visited by her relatives from Courland. She was a Russian by birth, but had left her country a few years previous to the opening of this narrative, to reside in Prussia.

The Countess of Ruthenberg had been very beautiful in her youth, and had played an important and brilliant part at the court of St. Petersburg, before the time when the Emperor Alexander I. became pious, or even thought of becoming so. At last, however, she fell into disgrace, and retired to the chateau of Turellen, which had belonged for many years to her family. She had no children, and lived in the greatest luxury in her retreat, which she rarely left, except to visit some of the German watering places.

She had resided in Prussia four or five years, when strange rumors were set afloat about the chateau. The countess had received a visit, a month previously, from one of her nephews from Courland—the young Count of Ruthenberg, who, a fortnight afterward, suddenly disappeared. One night he took leave of his aunt as usual, and retired to his chamber. The next morning his bed was found undisturbed, his clothes in their usual place, but of the count himself not the slightest trace was discovered.

The countess had at first manifested the utmost anxiety, but soon after spoke of the matter with great indifference. The Ruthenbergs were all strange people. Perhaps the young count had embarked in some adventure; perhaps some sudden caprice had seized him, in the pursuit of which he had been led on further than he had intended to go, and from which he would doubtless return in due time. But a fortnight elapsed, and yet no traces were found of the young count, nor was any news received from him. The rumors which were afloat began to assume a serious shape, and it was even asserted that, on the night of his disappearance, strange noises had been heard proceeding from the chateau, followed by stifled cries for assistance.

These rumors reached my ears, and as I was then justice of the peace of Lithuania, and as the chateau of Turellen was within the circle of my jurisdiction, I thought it my duty to inquire into the affair, and to that end wrote to the bailiff of the vicinity for information.

He replied by assuring me that the rumors afloat were certainly well founded, but that the countess was not at all uneasy, and attributed the count's disappearance to a mere freak, which was quite in keeping with his reckless character. As regarded the noises and cries said to have been heard, he had been able to obtain no positive information.

A few weeks later, after I had almost forgotten the affair, I received a visit which surprised me greatly. At a late hour in the evening a carriage stopped before my door.

A few moments after, my servant announced that a stranger had insisted upon speaking with me, but refused to send up his name, and was awaiting me in the parlor.

A man in my position is of course accustomed to receive mysterious visits.

I went below at once, and found myself in the presence of an old gentleman, elegantly dressed. He was a tall, slender man of stately bearing, whose exquisite politeness was quite in keeping with his general appearance. His whole air and manner, together with the mocking smile which played about his thin lips, bespoke the diplomat.

“I am Count Alexander Ruthenberg,” he said, “attached to the Russian Embassy at the court of ___”

“How can I serve you, count?” I inquired.

“I have a confidential communication to make to you, of a most serious nature. Can I rely upon your discretion? on the most complete discretion—the most absolute silence?”

“Assuredly; at least, so long as they do not conflict with my duties as a judge.”

“It is precisely to you, in your capacity as a judge, that I address myself, to learn if what I am about to relate to you can be verified or not. Outside of this, personally, the result is a matter of indifference to me. But to my story. The Countess Ruthenberg of Turellen is my sister-in-law.”

“Ah!”

“I have been visiting her during the past week. A month previous to my arrival, my nephew, Count Paul, had been with her, and suddenly disappeared after a sojourn of a fortnight at the chateau.”

“I am aware of this fact.”

“Have you entertained any suspicions concerning his disappearance?”

“Many rumors have been afloat in reference to it, but I have been unable to verify them.”

“I fear that I enable you to do so. My sister-in-law thinks that this disappearance is a youthful freak; but the countess is a woman who looks at things from a frivolous point of view. It is her habit to do so.”

A scarcely perceptible sneer curled the lips of the diplomat, and he continued in a light tone:

“The young man has doubtless been guilty of some folly, but I fear it has cost him his life.”

“Then you think that there has been a murder?”

“Have the kindness to follow me attentively. Last year my sister-in-law visited the watering-place of Ems. There she engaged, as a companion, a very beautiful young lady. A few days after this, a young man came and offered his services as a gamekeeper. My sister-in-law also took him into her employ, and he accordingly accompanied her and the young lady to Turellen. Between the young people some mysterious tie existed, or, at any rate, they met frequently in secret. They must have been acquainted before entering the household of the countess. But you will ask what connection can there be between these circumstances and the disappearance of my nephew?”

“Indeed, count, I cannot see—”

“I beg that you will hear me out. Two months since, my nephew came to Turellen. He was—I wish that I could say he is, but, unfortunately, I can only speak of him in the past tense—he was very wild, reckless, headstrong, and neither his father nor my sister-in-law had ever checked him in his wayward and evil habits.

“He had just passed a year in Paris, to complete his education, when he made this visit. Here he met the young lady companion, who, as I before mentioned, was exceedingly beautiful, and with whom he immediately fell violently in love. He had never been thwarted in any of his wishes, so he persecuted the lady with his attention; while she, finding that her repulses only increased his passion, at last demanded protection from my sister-in-law.

“The countess is frivolous, and attaches little importance to matters of this kind; so she coldly informed the young lady that she never interfered in affairs of the heart.

“‘But the heart has nothing to do with this affair,’ replied the young companion. ‘Then it is only a flirtation, and I am still less disposed to give myself annoyance about it,’ added the countess; and she repeated the conversation in the same light tone to the young count, who, in consequence, became doubly pressing in his suit.

“The persecuted young girl, it appears, now confined herself to her apartments, which she left only when sent for by her employer. Doubtless she made some arrangements for leaving the chateau at this time, for she wrote many letters. There seems throughout to be something mysterious in her history—however, this is not to the point.

“But in proportion as she took pains to avoid being in the presence of my nephew, the gamekeeper (the handsome fellow who had been brought from Germany) sought to keep the count always in sight. He followed him constantly with looks full of anger and menace. Was it from jealousy, or some other cause? This question I have not been able to answer in my own mind.

“On the night of my nephew’s disappearance, the companion had served tea, and remained with the countess until ten o’clock, when she retired to her own apartments[.] A few moments

subsequently, my nephew also bade his aunt good night. He was never seen afterward. You were doubtless familiar with all these circumstances before, sir?"

I bowed assent.

"But probably your knowledge of the affair rests here? The young lady occupies (for she is still at Turellen) a sitting-room with an adjacent bedchamber, on the ground floor overlooking the garden. Next to her apartments is a third room, which communicates with them.

"The countess never enters this room, which is used as a library, and her companion, who was the only person who frequented it, rarely closed the door opening into it from her chamber. The key remains, or did remain, in the lock. It was easy, therefore, to gain access through this library to her chamber; the windows of the latter have heavy inside shutters, while there are only blinds to those of the library.

"The night of my nephew's disappearance was toward the last of April. One, or several of the windows of the library were open. He retired to his own chamber, but only for the sake of appearances, for he speedily extinguished his light, and went out softly, closing his door, so that the inmates of the house might suppose that he was asleep. He next quietly descended the stairs and entered the garden without being perceived; he then directed his steps to the side of the chateau inhabited by the young lady in question.

"The lights were out in her rooms. He listened for a moment to assure himself that she was sleeping, and hearing no movement, he entered the library through one of the windows, making use of a peach-tree growing beneath it. The blinds were not latched, but only tightly closed, for during the day he had entered the library and arranged them to suit his purposes. He had therefore only to push them open and jump into the room.

"Once there, he was, so to speak, almost in the young lady's chamber, for, as you will remember, the door leading into it from the library was never locked."

CHAPTER II.

HYPOTHESIS OF A MURDER.

I HERE thought fit to interrupt the count. For the last few moments I had listened to him with the utmost astonishment. What he had first related to me he might have learned by questioning the servants, or from the admissions of his frivolous sister-in-law. But how, and by what means, had he become acquainted with the latter details?

"Count," I inquired, "have you received any news from your nephew since his disappearance?"

"None, sir."

"Then there are parties who must be aware what has become of him?"

"None that I know of."

“Yet you relate to me circumstances which can only be known to himself, or to someone who had closely observed his conduct.”

“Assuredly; but I have not yet finished my recital.”

“Have the kindness to inform me of the source whence you have obtained your information.”

“I am quite prepared to do so. I have never been a detective, nor even a magistrate—”

“It is difficult to realize the fact.”

“But I am a diplomat—an old diplomat.”

“Well?”

“Well, I am a careful observer, and can deduce conclusions from my observations as well as a detective.”

“Then you are only giving me the benefit of your observations and deductions?”

“Sir, I have made human nature my study. I knew my nephew well; I have also fathomed the countess and her companion. I have observed everything at Turellen—the arrangement of the house, the inmates, and the life which they lead. Rest assured, therefore, that I am able to draw just conclusions from my observations.”

“Do these conclusions relate to your nephew’s disappearance?”

“Precisely. Shall I continue?”

“I beg that you will do so.”

“My nephew being in the library, approached the young lady’s room and listened. All was quiet. He opened the door softly and entered the room. She was sleeping. He whispered, ‘Alice!’

“I believe this is her name. She awakens, is about to call for assistance, but he closes her mouth with kisses. She had recognized his voice; besides, the moon was shining brightly on this April night.

“She starts from his embrace with horror, and is again about to scream for assistance. But the young count is a true Ruthenberg, and his will is of iron; besides, had he not been a student at a German university, and completed his education at Paris?

“‘My dear girl,’ he said, quietly, ‘if you alarm the servants they will find me here—in your chamber.’

“‘Wretch!’ she cries, ‘leave here instantly!’

“‘It would be a crime to obey you, my fair Alice, a crime against your beauty and your love.’

“‘Infamous wretch!’

“The conversation continued for some time in this strain. The girl is the soul of honor, and is courageous and energetic. She was maddened by despair. She remembered her poniard, and finding no other means of deliverance, she seized it and plunged it into the bosom of the count. It touched a vital part, and he fell dead at her feet!

“She has escaped one danger only to incur another[.] She is in despair. Then comes to her assistance the mysterious gamekeeper, or perhaps she goes in search of him. What is she to do? Shall she relate what has happened? But she has committed a murder, and not strictly in self-defense, for she had but to call for assistance and a dozen servants would have responded to her summons.

“She must dispose of the corpse. But how to do so? The slightest accident would betray her. There was no time to lose. The gardeners would at an early hour be at their work. The bloodstains in her chamber must be effaced before daybreak.

“But where conceal the corpse? If it were not borne away from the chateau detection was inevitable, and to hide it in either of her own rooms was also to expose herself to great danger. There remained, then, only the library as a place of concealment. No one save herself frequented that apartment.

“They bore the corpse into the library, then raised some of the boards of the floor, and after having dug a sufficiently large hole beneath, they deposited in it the body of my nephew, threw back the earth and replaced the floor. The body still lies there!”

The count ceased speaking. But even before he had concluded I had decided upon my plan of action.

“Count,” I inquired, “would you be willing to repeat before a notary what you have just told me?”

“No, sir, I should be silent; and if you were even to allude to our conversation, I should deny that it had taken place.”

“Then pray may I inquire, since you are so determined on this point, why you have thought proper to communicate your suspicions to me?”

“In order to induce you to cause a judicial investigation of this mystery. For I supposed that, after you had listened to my communication, you would feel yourself in duty bound to do so.”

“Our laws forbid a judge to notice anonymous denunciations.”

“I sincerely regret it. My nephew is certainly dead, at least I fully believe so. True, an inquiry would not restore him to life, and one man more or less in the world, even when that man is a Count Ruthenberg, makes no great difference. Still, I very much wish an investigation could take place.”

“Without being considered impertinent, may I inquire why?”

“Why? I will tell you frankly. I am desirous to know if my observations were just, and if my deductions and conclusions are correct.”

Although his reply bordered on cynicism, the frivolity of this Russian diplomat was so original that one could not but admire him in spite of it. Besides, his communication, although he refused to give it publicity, and although it did not oblige me to prosecute my inquiries further, piqued my curiosity, and I continued the conversation, in order to ascertain how far I could depend on what he said.

“Count, I will only begin the investigation which you desire on one condition.”

“And what may that be?”

“I will go to Turellen, to interrogate your sister-in-law, and if she shares your suspicions—”

“She does share them, and will not hesitate to admit it. But what will you do afterward?”

“I will question all the other inmates of the chateau.”

“All! The young lady also?”

“Most assuredly.”

“Ah, if this be so, sir, I agree beforehand to your conditions.”

“Then assure me, on your honor, that the facts which you have related to me are true, and that you are convinced of the exactitude of the conclusions at which you have arrived.”

“Will you give me your word not to mention at Turellen my visit to you? I warn you that, should you speak of it, I will deny it in the most positive manner.”

“I promise, on my honor, to keep your secret.”

“And I in turn give you the assurance which you require. I wish you success in the prosecution of your inquiries, sir, and have the honor to bid you good night.”

He rose, bowed and departed, and I soon heard his carriage-wheels sounding in the distance.

CHAPTER III.
THE COUNTESS OF RUTHENBERG.

MY visitor left me a prey to the most contradictory emotions. He had apparently no direct interest in this matter, at least I could not perceive that his denunciation arose from any personal motive. But was it not to be feared that he had been influenced by some sinister consideration, and only wished to make use of me to accomplish an evil design? Besides, in sifting what he had told me, I found that he had presented but few actual facts, and that his recital was mostly made up of his own conclusions, and these were vague materials on which to begin an investigation.

What, I asked myself, is the object to be gained in prosecuting this affair? To prove a murder, doubtless. But also to place the culprit in the hands of the law.

Now, who is this culprit? The count himself had admitted her to be a virtuous and charming girl, who, without friends on whom to rely, and surrounded by evil-minded and unscrupulous persons, to save her honor, and urged on by despair, had committed an action which, however, under a strict construction of the law, could not come under the exculpation of a homicide in self-defense.

And the victim? Was he not one of those vulgar debauchees, destitute alike of soul and honor, and was not his fate simply a just retribution for his brutal conduct?

And yet, how could I avoid presenting my inquiries? In my capacity of judge I had heard the denunciation by the count, and however much he might persist in refusing it publicity, it was still my duty to investigate the whole affair.

If his conclusions were unfounded, it would have the advantage of removing all suspicions from the young lady implicated; and, in the contrary event, it might still result to her benefit, for the count had admitted that he was not the only person who suspected her, but that his sister-in-law entertained the same suspicions with himself, which were at any moment liable to assume shape and take the form of a criminal accusation, in which case many extenuating circumstances that I could adduce might possibly fail to be brought forward.

My duty, as well as the young girl's interests, demanded that I should take immediate action in this matter.

Shortly after forming this determination, I found myself at Turellen, in the presence of the countess. I had involuntarily painted her, in my own mind, as a woman of whom age had conferred *embonpoint*, but who still preserved traces of her former beauty, with perhaps indications of her early frivolity in the way of freedom of speech and lightness of manner. In my first supposition I was right; in the latter, entirely at fault. I had judged her by the man's standard, and was consequently deceived. Appearances, of which men are so often regardless, are everything to women. They can only live respected by preserving them intact; she alone dares to trample them under her feet who is dead to all sense of virtue and honor.

The Countess of Ruthenberg was still handsome. Her simple and elegant toilet was so harmonious and becoming, that you would have supposed her forty rather than sixty years of age. But her manner was that of a woman who had lived the greater number of years. Her bearing was grave and dignified—her expression cold and almost severe. I saw at once that her powers of dissimulation were great, and that I had an adroit woman of the world to deal with.

I felt that I must begin by informing her frankly of the object of my visit, for she was too shrewd, on the announcement of my name, not to have divined that I visited her in my official capacity.

“Madame, I am a justice of the peace, and my duty as such must excuse my troubling you with this visit.”

In spite of her reserve, she politely rejoined:

“I could have wished, sir, that I owed this honor to some other cause. In any case, however, you are most welcome, and I am all attention to what you may have to say.”

“Some time since you were visited by your nephew, the Count of Ruthenberg, and a fortnight afterward he suddenly disappeared.”

The countess bowed assent.

“Have you heard from him since then?”

“I have not, sir.”

“Have you any suspicions as to the cause of his disappearance?”

“Permit me, sir, to inquire, before replying, if you attribute his disappearance to a murder?”

“Personally, I have no suspicions; but there are rumors afloat which it is my duty to verify or dispel. Do you yourself believe that a murder has been committed?”

“I have no reason to believe so.”

“How, then, do you account for your nephew’s disappearance?”

“It is to me an inexplicable mystery, which I can only hope that time will unravel.”

“May I inquire who are the inmates of your chateau?”

“Myself and servants.”

“Are they numerous?”

“I have a young lady companion, a butler, six lackeys, three maids and two cooks. Do you wish also to know the *personnel* of my kitchen?”

“No. You have also a gamekeeper, I believe?”

“Yes; but he does not reside in the chateau. He occupies a cottage in the neighboring wood, about ten minutes’ walk from here.”

“Has he a family?”

“He is a widower, and resides alone with his daughter.”

CHAPTER IV.
PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATIONS.

I PAUSED in surprise. The count had mentioned a gamekeeper, but as a young man who had some mysterious relations with the companion. There was, then, some misunderstanding. Nevertheless, the existence of this gamekeeper, who, with his daughter, resided in the vicinity of the chateau, arrested my attention, and I had a presentiment that this circumstance was in some way connected with the success of my investigation. So I continued my inquiries:

“Is this gamekeeper the only person inhabiting the forest?”

“His cottage is entirely isolated.”

“What kind of a man is he?”

“He is a stern man, who performs his duties with the utmost exactitude.”

“And his daughter?”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“What is her reputation?”

“I have not inquired concerning it, and have never heard anything in favor of, or against her.”

“Then you have not seen her?”

“Yes, she sometimes comes to the chateau.”

“Is she pretty?”

“Yes, she is very pretty.”

My presentiments were becoming verified; for I too had formed conclusions, differing entirely from those of the count. The nephew of this latter had doubtless met the gamekeeper's daughter in the chateau or grounds. This pretty girl had pleased him, and she had not repulsed so rich and handsome a suitor. Some evening the father had surprised them. He was a stern man, and what followed might easily be imagined.

The countess had read my thoughts. She shook her head.

"No, no," she said, "there was no love affair between my nephew and this young girl."

"Are you sure of that, madame?"

"Had such been the case I should have known it."

A slight smile passed over her lips. It was the first time that she had smiled. I read in her eyes, "Had he sought this young girl he would have informed me of it."

"You have doubtless an under-gamekeeper?"

"Certainly."

"Is he young?"

"About twenty years of age."

"How long has he been in your employ?"

"I brought him with me from Germany last summer."

"And has your female companion been long with you?"

"The same length of time."

"Is she still young?"

"She is scarcely twenty."

"Do you know anything of her family or past history?"

"No, sir. Last year at Ems I sought a young lady as a companion. She was presented to me—she pleased me, and I engaged her without inquiry."

"Have you not had cause to regret your choice?"

"No, sir. She is a perfect lady in point of education and manners, and of a most amiable disposition, although exceedingly reserved."

“And you have found no reason to question her morality?”

“On the contrary, sir, her principles are above suspicion.”

“Pardon me, madame, this inquiry, but my duties as a judge require me to make it—what relations existed between this lady and your nephew?”

I had expected to have seen a faint, mocking smile curl the lips of the countess. But her expression was cold and unchanged, and yet I fancied that I could detect a feeling of uneasiness beneath her calmness and assurance. Scarcely, however, had I had time to remark this when it had disappeared.

She replied to my question in a firm, quiet voice, not unmixed with pride—a pride, the equivocal significance of which I fully understood.

“Sir, their relations were always such as should have existed between the nephew and the companion of the Countess of Ruthenberg.”

I thought these words somewhat out of place from the lips of a woman like the countess; they neither agreed with what I had heard of her or of her nephew. But as the lady had taken refuge in her pride, I knew it would be folly to attempt to induce her to make an admission which she had denied with such hauteur. I therefore changed my tactics.

“Do not the apartments of your companion overlook the garden?”

“Yes, sir; they are on the ground floor.”

“Do they not adjoin a library?”

The troubled expression became this time more marked upon her face. She looked at me inquiringly and uneasily; then, as if fearing that her glance had betrayed her, she suddenly dropped her eyes.

It was evident that I was making some progress now. The countess soon recovered her self-possession, and replied calmly:

“There is an old library, certainly, adjoining her chamber.”

“Have you visited that library since the disappearance of your nephew?”

“No, sir; I have not been in it for over a year.”

“Since the evening in question, have you noticed any change in the manner or conduct of your companion?”

“None, sir.”

“Pardon me, madame, if I dwell so much on this circumstance; but I consider it highly important, and I beg you will endeavor to call to mind—”

“Do you suppose me capable of concealing from you the truth?”

“I will be frank with you, madame. In the conversation we have just had, you yourself have furnished me with a clew—”

“I, sir?”

“Which it is my duty to follow up. To this end, therefore, it is necessary that I should interrogate the persons in your employ.”

Provoked to such an extent as to be thrown off her guard, she exclaimed, angrily:

“You have promised to be frank with me?”

“Certainly, madame.”

“Well, tell me the name of the person who last night paid you a visit, regarding this matter?”

She had betrayed herself. My words had convinced her that her brother had communicated his suspicions to me. She had divined their nature, and this at once convinced me of their importance. I made her a diplomatic reply:

“Madame, the law imposes it as a duty upon a judge sometimes to refuse to answer inquiries, and yours is among the number.”

She placed her hand before her eyes and appeared to reflect, remaining motionless for some moments. She felt that she had betrayed herself. But this consciousness, the breast of the proud and adroit countess, whose life had been a constant triumph, and who now found herself beaten with her own weapon by a poor country judge, was full of bitterness. It had awakened all the evil passions of her corrupt nature, and her pride and the self-possession which never desert a true woman of the world were all that prevented her from giving expression to her anger and her hatred.

Suddenly she drew up her head, and, rising from her chair with a look of pride and scorn, in a cold, cutting tone, said:

“Sir, honor is to me above all other consideration, and I should deem myself dishonored if I became guilty of treachery. You are free to fulfill your official duties in my house, but I will no longer be annoyed by your interrogatories!”

She bowed slightly, and quitted the room with the tread of an empress, but she was nevertheless defeated!

CHAPTER V.
SUSPICIONS CONFIRMED.

LIKE her brother-in-law, the countess believed her companion guilty of the murder of her nephew, and both had arrived at this conclusion through a thorough knowledge of the two persons and the place. The diplomat, whose frivolity respected nothing, and who, besides, had nothing to conceal, had at once, and without scruple, communicated his suspicions to me for the simple pleasure of ascertaining whether his judgment was correct. The countess had manifested greater reserve.

She was a woman habituated for many years to guard appearances. The revelation of the murder would have induced much discussion, and have tarnished the honor of her house and family, and she preferred leaving her nearest and dearest relative buried in an obscure corner of the chateau, rather than create a scandal.

She also feared lest the inquest should betray that she had permitted, perhaps encouraged even, the improper advances of her nephew, and that some responsibility might therefore rest upon her own head. I was reflecting upon what further steps I should take, when a servant came, by his mistress's orders, to inquire my wishes.

“Is the countess's companion at home?” I inquired.

“She is in her own apartments, sir.”

“Have the goodness to conduct me to her.”

“She is there,” he said, after leading me through a long corridor at the other end of the chateau.

I knocked at the door. My heart beat violently. I was about to fulfill one of the most painful duties of my calling, and I could not but feel compassion for the poor girl whose agonizing incertitude I was about to convert into a still more terrible certainty.

A soft voice bade me enter. On doing so I perceived a beautiful young girl bending over an embroidery frame; she rose to receive me with the easy, well-bred air of one accustomed to society. She, however, betrayed a little astonishment, mingled with uneasiness.

I saw at a glance in her noble and beautiful countenance that I should find this young girl a totally different person from the countess. While the expression of the latter was full of cunning secretiveness, hers was all honesty and candor.

“Mademoiselle,” I began, “I am the justice of the peace of—.”

She had murdered the count! Nothing but the consciousness of crime could have caused her such terror at this simple announcement. She became pale as death. The needle with which she was embroidering fell from her hand. She staggered to a sofa, and motioned me to be seated. Then began my cruel questions.

“Have the goodness to tell me your name, mademoiselle?”

“Alice Braun,” she replied, in a scarcely audible tone.

“Where were you born?”

“In a village on the banks of the Rhine.”

“When did you come to Turellen?”

“Last summer. I was at Ems when I entered the service of the countess.”

“Where had you resided previously?”

“In a chateau on the banks of the Rhine—as *demoiselle de compagnie*.”

“The nephew of the countess came to Turellen, I believe, some weeks since?”

“Yes, sir.”

She made this reply in a firm, clear tone. She had recovered her self-possession more speedily than I had supposed possible. Feelings of honor, love of life, and, above all, that instinct of self-preservation which danger develops to so great a degree, had armed even this young girl with that supernatural power of resistance which a judge so soon becomes familiar with, and which frequently thwarts his most skillfully laid plans.

“How long did the count remain in the chateau?” I next inquired.

“About a fortnight.”

“Where did he go when he left here?”

“One night he suddenly disappeared, since which time nothing has been heard of him.”

Her voice still retained its firmness and composure.

“He has disappeared, you say, and everyone is ignorant of the cause of his disappearance?”

“I believe so.”

“*You* believe so, mademoiselle?”

I watched her closely as I put this unexpected question, but not a muscle in her face moved. She sustained my glance unflinchingly. Was she really supported by that strange strength which the guilty derive from despair? If so, I must break down that support.

I made several other attempts to induce her to admit her crime.

“Had the count formed many acquaintances in the neighborhood during his sojourn at Turellen?”

“I do not know.”

“How did he pass his time when he was here?”

“He passed it in the society of his aunt.”

“You also were much with the countess?”

“It was among my duties to be so.”

“Were you frequently alone with the count?”

“Never, sir.”

She replied in a proud, pained tone; but her voice, up to this time so firm, now became somewhat tremulous.

“Did he not, on several occasions, profess love for you?”

“I cannot conceive, sir, your object in making such inquiries!”

Her self-possession had returned, and if I was to accomplish anything it must be by giving my interrogatories a different turn.

“Did the count hunt frequently?”

“No, sir.”

“Did he wander much about the grounds?”

“I think not.”

“Do you know the daughter of the gamekeeper?”

“She frequently comes to the chateau.”

“Did she come here during the count’s stay?”

“I do not know.”

My last inquiry caused her to muse for a moment, but she soon after shook her head gently, as if admitting to herself that she was deceived, while an expression of sadness and pain spread over her countenance.

“Has not the countess a gamekeeper in her service?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did she not bring him with her from Ems last summer?”

“She did, sir.”

“Were you not acquainted with him before he entered into the employ of the countess?”

Her face became crimson. She reflected for a moment, then replied, calmly:

“He had been employed in the vicinity of the chateau where I resided before coming to Turellen.”

Now was the moment to strike a decisive blow!

“Mademoiselle, does not your chamber adjoin a library?”

“Yes,” she answered, faintly.

The question must have affected her deeply, for she shuddered from head to foot.

“Will you have the goodness to conduct me to it?”

She was deadly pale, and trembled like an aspen. I had risen, and she endeavored to do the same, but was obliged to cling to a chair for support.

“Be so kind as to follow me,” she said at last, making a strong effort to recover her self-possession.

And, passing through her bedchamber, she opened the door which communicated with the library.

CHAPTER VI. THE CRUEL TEST.

I FOUND everything as the count had described. The library was a large, square room, with antique carvings in woodwork, which were partially concealed by several high bookcases, while a number of small tables, covered with writing materials, were scattered about the room. The

floor was not carpeted, but very old, as was evident from the antiquity of the designs upon it; but no indications were visible of the spot where the boards had been raised.

Besides the door communicating with the chamber of the young lady, there was another leading into the passage. The room had three windows, all overlooking the garden. One faced the hall door, the other two were opposite the bedchamber. Beneath one of these was a peach-tree, now in full blossom. I took in all these features at a glance.

Was the young count actually resting here? This girl, who stood before me, pale and trembling, had she really been guilty of this terrible crime? If so, how great her agony, how fearful her anxiety, in finding herself so near her victim, who was perhaps beneath her feet at this very moment, and she is in the presence of a judge, who was soon to be succeeded by the executioner! In many of the old German chronicles, the executioner is frequently called “the cousin of the judge.”

If one plank in that floor were raised, the murder would be discovered, and the judge, possessed of her terrible secret, had but to surrender the criminal to the executioner. And she knew all this!

She had recovered herself considerably, but must by this time have become aware that I entertained certain suspicions, which I had determined to verify or dispel. She watched my looks and movements with an anxiety which proved that she was aware that on these perhaps depended her life or death.

She awaited my next words with the liveliest anxiety. I remained standing in the centre of the room.

“Mademoiselle,” I continued, “I will no longer annoy you with my inquiries. I will simply relate a story to you. This story is very sad—even terrible—and I fear that it is true. After you have heard it, you will comprehend that my duty as a judge compels me to investigate it.”

This commencement caused her to shudder. She cast down her eyes, and said nothing. I resumed:

“The scene of the story is laid in this chateau; in fact, mostly in this very room.”

She started, and raised her eyes to mine for a moment with a terrified expression.

“Yes, mademoiselle, I have reason to believe that it ended in a terrible tragedy in this library.”

She trembled in every limb.

“One day a young man arrived in this chateau. He was a debauchee, destitute of honor and of shame. He insulted a high-toned, virtuous girl.”

On her beautiful brow, white as marble, stood cold drops of agony.

“He had even the audacity to enter her chamber.”

She trembled so violently that she could no longer support herself. I took her hand and led her to a chair, into which she sank, apparently utterly unconscious of what she was doing.

My conduct was cruel, and I suffered bitterly through the terrible test to which I was forced to subject this young girl. But it was only by surprising her by some sudden shock that I could elicit her confession; in any other case, I should have been forced to subject her to a long examination, which would but have prolonged her torture.

Now confession, even to the criminal who has no hope of pardon, is a great solace to the heart, and relieves it of a terrible weight. It is the first step toward repentance, which calms and soothes the conscience. Besides, any certainty, however sad, even that of death itself, is less harrowing than the agony of doubt. I continued:

“He gained access to her chamber. She vainly endeavored to induce him to leave her. Tears, prayers, threats—all were of no avail. Then she seized a poignard.”

“No, no!” she exclaimed.

I stopped and looked inquiringly at her. She dropped her eyes and remained silent. The time had not yet come when she would divulge her terrible secret. Nevertheless, the feeling that she could not long conceal it, and the instincts of self-preservation, produced an awful conflict in her breast. She was so pale and weak, that but for the convulsive movements of her frame, I should have supposed that she had lost consciousness. I went on:

“She seized a poignard, and, listening only to the promptings of despair, plunged it into his breast. He fell dead at her feet. The most terrible anguish succeeded to her despair. But it was necessary to efface all traces of the crime, and to dispose of the body. She succeeded in doing both.”

She looked around her in a wild, terrified manner. Doubtless the fearful scene was before her eyes. Suddenly her glance became fixed and motionless, and was riveted on one of the dark corners of the library, as if something more powerful than her will retained it there.

“It is there,” said I, pointing to the corner, “that the body lies—there beneath those planks.”

“No, no, it does not! No, I swear to you!” she ejaculated.

Her voice was terrible in its anguish. She threw herself at my feet. I endeavored to raise her, but she clung to me convulsively.

“Let me die here!” she exclaimed. “Oh! sir, have pity on me! Kill me here in the same place!”

“Rise,” I said, “and do not give way to despair. Before thinking of death, think of your conscience, of the justice of man, and, above all, of that of God, whose mercy none may hope for who do not repent and expiate their faults.”

These words calmed and strengthened her. She rose, and I conducted her to the sofa, taking a seat beside her. Then grasping her hand, in as firm a voice as I could command, I said:

“You must tell me all, mademoiselle; you must relieve your mind from the secret which oppresses it.”

Although still deeply agitated, she was about to reply, but her strength was not equal to the task, and she burst into a flood of tears.

“Let me relieve my heart thus,” she said.

The past, a happy past, doubtless, suddenly rose up before her. I allowed her to weep on; even the bitterest tears are a solace to the heart. With her they were an eternal adieu to the memories of the past, to the hopes of the future, to her youth and her life.

Her thoughts doubtless wandered back to her joyful childhood, to the paternal roof, where she had lived so carelessly and so happily. Still so young, yet she had been obliged to leave her friends to enter into the service of strangers; and there, persecuted, menaced, her honor at stake, she had committed a murder to preserve it. She had no one to assist, no one to advise her! And though an opportunity were afforded her of appealing to her family, what use would there be in doing so? Could she call upon her poor mother, already doubtless sufficiently tried, upon her sisters who loved her, to witness her crime, her shame, and probably her death? Ah, far better to die alone, without an arm to sustain her in this struggle, than to share the terrors of her expiation with those innocent hearts!

Doubtless all this had passed through her mind, but her tears had afforded her some relief. She was more collected, and looked her position in the face with more calmness. She began her sad recital voluntarily.

“Now I am ready,” she said. “Shall I tell you even what relates to my early history?”

“I must know all that concerns you in the past, as well as in the present.”

“I will be frank with you, sir, and will conceal nothing.”

CHAPTER VII.

THE CONFESSION—MORE MYSTERY.

[“]MY father was a bailiff, in a village on the banks of the Rhine. When he died, four years since, I was in my fifteenth year. He left no fortune, and my mother, an invalid sister and myself found ourselves reduced to a small widow’s pension, on which they are still managing to live in Coblenz. Fortunately, I had received a good education, and at once sought a position as governess or companion. At the end of about six months, I was engaged in a neighbor’s family who had known my father. There I remained until last summer, when I entered the employ of the countess.”

She paused. And I fancied, now that she had come to this eventful period of her life, that she was in doubt as to whether she was right in relating to me its history.

“Why did you leave this family, who had known your father?” I inquired.

Her resolution was taken.

“I will tell you all,” she replied. “I there made the acquaintance of a young Englishman, who was stopping with his family in the neighborhood. Harry Weston and myself became mutually attached, but his parents, who were very wealthy, refused their consent to his union with a poor girl like myself. His entreaties finally induced me to consent to a private marriage. It was solemnized by a clergyman, on condition that we separated immediately afterward, never to meet again until Harry had obtained his parents’ consent to our union. As he could not absent himself from his family, I resolved to leave the country. Then I engaged with the countess.

“Harry was unwilling that I should go entirely among strangers, so he sent me with a family servant whose devotion and fidelity could be relied upon. Anthony Rieder, who is honest as he is brave, was to accompany me everywhere, and to serve as an intermediary between my husband and myself, and if need be as a protector. When I entered into the service of the countess, he also was enabled to secure a situation with her.

“Harry has not yet obtained the consent of his parents, but they are tenderly attached to him, and we are both young and have confidence in the future.

“Ah!” she continued, sadly, “we *had* confidence before this terrible affair, but now there is no hope for either of us!”

After a short silence, she went on in a calmer tone:

“I lived contentedly here, for hope consoled me. But my happiness was of short duration. The countess’s nephew arrived at Turellen. He came with the intention of remaining only a week, but prolonged his stay.

“I soon found that it was I who detained him here, for he told me so openly. He was thoroughly unscrupulous, and made a boast of being so. He had no faith in the female sex, and with his usual effrontery intimated that I also was accessible. His aunt made light of all this, even in his presence. I met his insolence by silent contempt, feeling strong in the protection of Anthony, the gamekeeper. But I was much surprised that the count subjected me to his persecutions, even before his aunt. I had not counted on this. I shut myself up in my apartments, but the countess summoned me to return to her presence. I then insisted upon leaving the chateau, but she refused to permit my doing so, under the plea that the term for which I had engaged had not yet expired. I then resolved on flight, but neither Anthony nor myself had sufficient means to undertake a journey, and it would have been time lost to have asked for our salaries; the countess would have divined our object in doing so, and would have refused to make any advance.

“This was the state of affairs ten days after the count’s arrival. Four days later came the sad tragedy.

“I served tea that evening. The count was there as usual. During the day he had treated me with frigid politeness. But he was thoughtful, and whenever his eyes rested upon me, his face wore such a peculiar expression that I felt that he was meditating some sinister purpose. I was ill at ease; a strange terror took possession of me, and I retired at an early hour to my own room. He made no effort to detain me, nor did the countess either, although she had been in the habit of doing so for many days previously. Far from reassuring me, this sudden change of manner redoubled my fears.

“On reaching my chamber, I rang for the maid and sent for Anthony, in order to communicate my fears to him, and to urge his exercising more than ordinary watchfulness that night.

“The maid came back, saying that he had gone out to attend his duties, and was not likely to return before midnight.

“It was then ten o’clock, and I was nervous and uneasy. The more I reflected upon the count’s sinister expression, the more convinced did I become that he had formed evil designs against me. I even thought that he had sent Anthony away, lest he should interfere with his plans.

“I carefully closed my door, windows and shutters. The latter are strong and substantial, and can defy attack from the outside. I felt that I was safe from this quarter, but unfortunately did not feel equally so about the library windows, the blinds of which are old and insecure, and there would have been little difficulty in forcing them open. The door which communicates with my chamber had a lock, it was true, but it was so weak as to be of little protection. I had ascertained all these facts a few days previously. This lock could easily be forced without being heard by the servants, for the thick walls would probably have deadened any sound. If an attempt, therefore, was made to enter my chamber, I felt that it would be through the library.

“I consequently resolved not to retire before the return of Anthony, and to call for assistance at the slightest noise. In order to enter my chamber the count would be first obliged to burst open the door, and before he could have time to accomplish this I could make my way to the passage and arouse the servants, who were at no great distance. For greater security, I placed the poniard which Harry had given me in my bosom.

“I could have desired my maid to sleep in my chamber, it is true, but the girl would probably have feared to disobey the countess’s orders, which were very positive, that all her domestics should retire to their chambers at a certain hour, and not leave them. Besides, in case my suspicions were not verified, it would have been an admission of my fears, which would have compromised my employer’s and my own reputation.

“My best plan, therefore, was to secure myself as far as possible from intrusion. I closed my own rooms carefully, drew the bolt of the library door, and examined the windows, two of which I found closed, as also the blinds. But the third—” and here she pointed to the window facing her

room—“was open, and the blinds fastened back. This circumstance astonished me, for I remembered having closed them before supper.

“Perhaps, however, I might have forgotten to do so. As I drew near to shut them, I looked out into the garden; all was silent and I saw no one. Reassured by this, I put my arm out of the window to draw in the blinds, when suddenly I felt it strongly grasped by a man, concealed beneath the peach-tree under the window. I sought to draw my arm from him, but did not succeed.

“This sudden and unexpected attack had deprived me of all presence of mind. Instead of putting my head out of the window and calling for help in the garden, where my screams would have been heard, I involuntarily started back, and they were deadened by the thick walls.

“I was about to raise my voice again, when a man appeared at the window. I recognized him; he was the count. He jumped upon the windowsill without loosening his hold, and placed his hand over my mouth. Vainly did I endeavor to repulse him; I was unable to scream. The wildest terror came over me on finding myself thus at his mercy! The only being on whom I could rely for succor was absent. I felt myself the victim of an infamous plot, dishonored and miserable for the balance of my life, and forever separated from the husband of my love. I scarcely knew what I did. My left hand, which the count had seized, still convulsively clutched the blind, but my right hand was free, and with this I drew my poniard. The count was about to leap into the room. I raised my weapon—then—”

She stopped; her voice was stifled by emotion. Her face had become of ashen paleness, and she looked wildly about her. She was evidently living over again those terrible moments.

“Well, what followed?” I inquired.

She buried her face in her hands and burst into tears.

Poor girl! she had arrived at that cruel point in her story which might seal her fate. Another word, and she felt that she consigned herself into the hands of justice, perhaps into those of the executioner. Was it therefore astonishing that her voice refused further utterance?

She had wished to be clasped, pure and faithful, to her husband’s breast, to present an innocent forehead to her mother’s kiss; but she could never again enter the presence of either husband or mother.

“What followed?” I again inquired.

She subdued her feelings after a time, and continued in a voice full of emotion and with eyes cast down:

“Then I saw a hand, clasping a large poniard, strike a desperate blow at the count’s breast. A moment afterward, he fell upon the floor at my feet—a corpse! What followed for some time after this, I do not know, for I fainted.”

She stopped again, and again found relief in tears.

As for myself, an immense weight seemed lifted from my heart, and I breathed again freely as I felt that for the poor child there was still life and hope.

The compassion with which this unfortunate young girl inspired me, the nobility of her character, the evident sincerity of her confession, had produced so profound an impression upon my mind, and I was so completely under the charm of her influence, that I did not at first question the truth of her last words. But doubts soon after arose in my mind.

A justice of the peace is rarely credulous, and the intervention of this hand, armed with a poniard, which arrived at such an opportune moment to save the young girl from a murder she was on the eve of committing, was something so marvelous and supernatural, that my reason refused to admit it. Besides, I had remarked that up to that point she had made her confession with exceeding frankness, but that subsequently she lowered her eyes, and her voice lost its firmness and clearness.

Nevertheless, although I did not implicitly credit her story, I had no right to decide that it was untrue. It was my duty to weigh carefully all the circumstances connected with it, and to question all the inmates of the chateau, until I obtained proofs of its reliability or falsehood.

Anthony, the younger gamekeeper, was blindly devoted to her. For many days he had watched over her with the utmost care. Might he not, at that fatal moment, have been hovering around her windows?

When she became more calm, I said:

“You lost your consciousness?”

“Yes, I fell into a fainting fit.”

“And when you recovered, what happened?”

“My position was agonizing in the extreme; the corpse lay beside me as evidence of the murder. But that another hand had committed it, and that I had fainted through fear alone, were circumstances by no means clear to my mind, but vague as in a dream. And yet my poniard lay near me. I examined it by the light of the moon. Not a drop of blood sullied the blade; it was pure and stainless.

“Who, then, had killed the count? I asked myself. Anthony? But if so, why had he thus left me? Could it be, knowing, without a doubt, that I should be accused and convicted of the murder, that he would have abandoned me in this dreadful position? I could not believe it. But the thought occurred to me that perhaps he had taken flight to preserve his life, and that as soon as he arrived in a place of safety, he would confess his crime.

“Although this was not at all in keeping with my knowledge of the character of the intrepid gamekeeper, still it was barely possible, and my position was none the less agonizing. I was alone with the corpse; I should be accused of murder, and pass through all the tortures of a judicial investigation, and the shame of an imprisonment.

“Oh, sir, how cruel is the position of a young girl, away from all who could befriend or protect her, in the midst of strangers! I never felt this so bitterly as during these awful moments.

“The window was still open, and the moon shone brightly on the face of the corpse. My solitude, my miserable thoughts, the horrible vicinity in which I found myself, threw me into a state bordering on madness. Suddenly I heard a noise in the garden, then hurried steps approaching the library. The wildest terror seized me, and I flew to the window. It was Anthony. I uttered a scream.

“‘Did I alarm you, mademoiselle?’

“‘Whence come you, Anthony?’

“‘I have just returned from the forest. All this evening I have been more than usually anxious about you, and should have returned earlier, but I was not alone. As soon as I could possibly get away, I hastened here by the shortest road, and seeing this window open at such an hour, I hurried to it, to ascertain if aught was wrong.’

“His gun and hunting accoutrements, which he still carried with him, attested the truth of the statement. It was not he, then, who had killed the count!

“‘Great God! What has happened?’ he inquired, as his eyes fell upon the dead body.

“He leaped into the library, closed the window, and I told him all. Like myself, he was unable to unravel the mystery. We next reflected upon what was best to be done in this emergency.

“‘There is no time to be lost!’ he exclaimed. ‘Suspicion cannot fail to rest upon you, and the real murderer will avail himself of this fact to make his escape. For had he intended to acknowledge his crime, he would not have disappeared thus. Appearances are so strongly against you, that you can scarcely hope to establish your innocence. This powerful family will require some victim, and you will be unable to escape. I might save you, if you would only permit me,’ said the brave fellow.

“‘Never, Anthony, never! I would proclaim your innocence with my latest breath, even though by doing so I should condemn myself. Never will I allow suspicion to rest on you!’

“‘I feared you would not consent,’ he said, sadly; ‘there remains for us, then, but one hope—the concealment of the corpse.’

“He reflected for a moment. His first impulse was to bear the body into the forest, but the watchdogs on scenting the corpse would have howled and directed attention to Anthony’s

movements. We consequently resolved to inter the count in the library. It was easy enough to move the boards in the floor, and replace them, without leaving any trace. It was then only eleven o'clock, and we had still time sufficient before us to dispose of the corpse during the night. And even in the daytime there was little fear of our being disturbed, as no one but myself entered the library, excepting, perhaps, at rare intervals, some visitors, who were shown through the chateau. The countess has a library of her own, and the servants never enter this one except by my orders. We labored all night; and when day broke our task was completed. The body was buried, the floor replaced, and all traces effaced of the murder.

“The bloody deed was concealed. Did the countess entertain suspicions? This I know not—she certainly manifested none. Her conscience, if so, must have been sufficiently remorseful to compel silence. If she really believed that a murder had been committed, and that Anthony and myself were implicated in it, how poignant must be her remorse!”

Such was the history told by the young lady.

The old Count of Ruthenberg, this diplomat as astute as he was frivolous, had then come pretty near the truth. His observations respecting the parties and place were certainly very exact, and his deductions therefrom singularly correct. His judgment only erred in its excessive frivolity. But was he really as near the truth as I supposed? Was the murder committed by Alice Braun, Anthony, or some person unknown?

I continued my interrogatories to ascertain whether what Alice had told me was indeed true, or whether it was a skillful tale invented by an adventuress. Her manner and her words had produced the most favorable impression upon me, and I had conceived an exalted opinion of her honor and her virtue. But a justice of the peace must not trust entirely to appearances.

“You say you are married? Have you a certificate to prove the fact?” I inquired.

“Yes, sir; the minister who united us gave one to both Harry and myself, in which the time and place of the marriage are stated.”

“Have you received letters from your husband?”

“I will lay before you all our correspondence.”

She conducted me to her chamber, and opening a bureau, took therefrom a small box containing the certificate and letters. Those of Weston were the only ones that I glanced over, and I found them overflowing with love and respect for his wife.

She was not, then, an adventuress! I was rejoiced in having acquired this certainty, and began to indulge in hopes of a happy future for the unfortunate girl.

CHAPTER VIII.

EXHUMATION OF THE CORPSE—A NEW WITNESS.

THE next thing to be done was to interrogate Anthony. If he were the murderer (and I was convinced that I could draw the admission from him), then Alice would be safe. If he were guiltless, I should be able to ascertain whether her story to me agreed in every point with that which she had related to him, and also if he really believed in her innocence—a circumstance which would greatly influence my future conduct.

My first duty, however, as prescribed by law, was to make a formal accusation against Alice Braun. I sent my carriage for two more surgeons from Tilsit, that an inquest should be held upon the body, and I ordered the driver also to bring with him two of my subordinates to the chateau.

These precautions taken, I desired Alice to show me her poniard. It was a delicate but strong weapon, of English manufacture. I could not discover upon it the slightest stain, nor indeed on the floor of the library, which I carefully examined.

My clerk arrived. And after having dictated a brief summary of Alice Braun's confession, I desired the young lady to await me in her own apartments. I wished to be alone in the library when I questioned Anthony, and ordered him to be brought before me. On hearing this order, Alice manifested unmistakable signs of uneasiness.

"You wish to interrogate Anthony?" she inquired.

"Certainly. Your fate depends in a great measure on his disclosures."

"But he is no longer here."

"Where is he, then?"

"I have sent him away."

"Explain yourself."

"I could no longer remain in this house. As it was doubtful whether the countess would permit me to leave before the term for which I had engaged had expired, and as I had no money with which to travel, I was forced to have recourse to Harry, for my mother is too poor to assist me. But it was my duty to explain to my husband my motive for wishing to leave here, and as I feared to send so important a letter by post, I thought it best to make Anthony the bearer of it."

"And the gamekeeper has not yet returned?"

"He will not be here before the end of a week. He had so little money! He must have gone nearly the whole distance on foot."

"This is a very unfortunate circumstance!"

"But he will certainly return."

“Do you think so?”

“I am sure of it. I can promise you that he will not delay a single day.”

Her tone was so earnest that it carried conviction with it. But the absence of Anthony was none the less an unfortunate circumstance for her, since it forced me to place her under arrest. I told her this.

The suffering which she had undergone in the last few hours had so crushed her, that she seemed almost insensible to this latter blow.

“During the past few weeks I have often thought of this terrible moment, but I did not supposed it so near at hand,” she said, with a deep sigh.

Poor girl! She would be condemned, until the gamekeeper’s return, to all the agonies of doubt, and all the horrors of imprisonment, and I could devise no means to save her from these trials.

Suddenly an idea presented itself to me respecting that stern gamekeeper, and his pretty, coquettish daughter.

“You became thoughtful,” I said to Alice, “when I spoke to you of the gamekeeper’s daughter.”

“No, no,” she replied, sadly shaking her head. “It was only from a foolish notion of mine.”

“You know nothing about her?”

“Absolutely nothing.”

Nevertheless, I sent the officers in search of the gamekeeper and his daughter, with orders to arrest them separately, but to treat them with the consideration due to witnesses.

When the two physicians arrived, I directed the floor to be raised, and the count’s body to be exhumed. It was found in a far advanced state of decomposition, but not sufficiently so as to preclude recognition.

Alice Braun was of course obliged to be present during the exhumation. It was a terrible trial for the poor girl, but she went through it as if sustained by supernatural strength. The sight of the corpse produced a most fearful effect upon the countess, who was also obliged by law to be present. I had previously informed her that her nephew had been murdered and interred in the library, but that I had as yet been unable to learn the circumstances under which the murder had been committed, nor to discover the murderer.

This intelligence had deeply moved her. Her conscience doubtless bitterly reproached her. But she exercised sufficient self-control to conceal her remorse and only betray her grief. I led her up to the corpse. As she passed Alice, she darted at her a look of such intense hatred as to prove that she considered her the murderess. The young girl, however, met it unflinchingly. The countess

was unable long to remain in the presence of the dead; she uttered a superhuman cry of remorse and despair, and fled from the room.

Alice must have been innocent; her conduct in the presence of the corpse contrasted so strongly with that of the countess, that I could not for a moment doubt her. But however deep this conviction might be in my own mind, it of course had no value in the eye of the law.

One circumstance favorable to the accused, but unfortunately of not sufficient weight to refute the strong evidence against her, was disclosed during the inquest. A large wound existed in the region of the heart. This organ, as was shown by the autopsy, was almost severed in two, and death must have been instantaneous. The wound had evidently not been produced by the straight, narrow poniard shown to me by Alice; it could only have been inflicted by a broad, short blade.

“Perhaps by a hunting-knife?” I inquired of the physicians.

“Probably,” they replied.

But they could not affirm this with certainty, as the body was so far decomposed, particularly in the immediate vicinity of the wound. I looked forward with the liveliest anxiety to the result of my interrogation of the gamekeeper and his daughter. It was the last hope for the young girl, and I dreaded to see it disappear. The officers only succeeded in finding the daughter, but one of them remained at the lodge, in order to conduct the father to the chateau as soon as he reached home. The only person whom I allowed to remain with me during the examination of the young woman was my clerk, whom I was obliged by law to permit to be present. The girl knew, doubtless, that the young count had been assassinated, and that the body had been exhumed, for the news of my visit and its result had probably already become tolerably widespread; but she was of course ignorant of the rest.

In my presence she seemed dumbfounded. She was a handsome girl, full of that coquetry which desires to please at any cost. She had doubtless encouraged the count, who made advances to every woman who was young and pretty. The confusion and mortification of the girl told this plainly enough, but nothing beyond.

“Did you know the young Count of Ruthenberg?” I inquired.

She blushed, and cast down her eyes.

“He passed a fortnight at the chateau, about two months since,” she responded.

“Then you were acquainted with him?”

“I have often seen him.”

“You have also frequently spoken with him?”

She blushed again.

“He addressed me once or twice.”

“He has been in your house?”

“Only once.”

“Was he alone there with you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where was your father?[]”

“Hunting, in the forest.”

“Was this in the daytime, or the night?”

“It was not yet dark.”

“But it was near evening?”

“Well, yes, sir.”

“Were you ever alone with him on other occasions?”

“Where could I have met him?”

“That is just what I wish to know.”

She trembled, and became so confused that she did not dare raise her eyes. It was evident that her relations with the count were of an equivocal character. I continue:

“Was your father aware of your intimacy with the count?”

“He never mentioned it to me.”

“Did he never speak to you of the count?”

“I do not remember.”

“You are evading my question.”

“Well, inquire of my father.”

CHAPTER IX.
THE MYSTERY SOLVED—A JUDGMENT OF GOD.

IT was evident that she had resolved to make no further admissions; she had even overcome her confusion. Either her father and herself were innocent of the murder, or they had agreed beforehand on what they should reply, in case of a summons. In either event, it was useless to pursue my inquiries further; it was sufficient for me to know the relations existing between the young woman and the count, without informing myself of the details.

I was almost hopeless of any good result, but still I again sent an officer in search of the gamekeeper. His daughter, who was present when I gave the order, manifested uneasiness at his tardiness in making his appearance. Her anxiety surprised me, as I could not account for it.

A short time after this, a man who had a letter for me was brought in by the officer. He was one of the day-laborers in the garden. He was pale and trembling, and gave a start of horror on perceiving the gamekeeper's daughter, who sprang toward him, exclaiming:

“You have seen my father?”

“Yes,” replied the man, casting down his eyes.

“Is he dead?”

“He has just killed himself!”

This is the account which the man gave of the affair: At the entrance of the forest he had met the gamekeeper, who, after handing him a note, which he desired him to deliver at the chateau, plunged into the thicket. A moment afterward the laborer heard the report of a gun, a short distance from him. He had been impressed by the strange, wild manner of the gamekeeper, and, apprehending some disaster, he entered the forest and found the poor fellow with a bullet through his head—dead. He at once, in terror, started for the chateau, to give me the letter and inform me of the suicide.

The gamekeeper then was indeed guilty, and my conjectures were correct!

On hearing this terrible relation, his daughter sank into a chair, in a state bordering on madness.

I read the note. The gamekeeper wrote that, learning that the murder had been discovered, and that Mademoiselle Braun had been accused of it, he preferred, rather than allow an innocent person to suffer for his crime, to confess his own guilt. Besides, his conscience had long upbraided him for his concealment. He found himself incapable of surviving his shame, and left it for his daughter to inform me of the rest.

After hearing this letter, the girl became fearfully excited.

“Yes,” she cried, “he killed that villain, but I was the cause of the murder—the cause, too, of my poor father's death!”

She was too much excited at the moment to be able to respond to my questions; besides, I had a still more urgent duty to perform—to put an end to the sufferings and anguish of Alice, by assuring her that her innocence was established. After having informed her of the suicide of the gamekeeper, I read his letter to her.

I shall never forget the noble and touching expression which relief and gratitude to Heaven spread over her pale and beautiful countenance. She took my hand and pressed it tenderly between her own; then she begged me to permit her to retire for a moment. She wished to pour out her thanks to God.

I returned to the gamekeeper's daughter. She made a full confession, dictated by repentance; she had now no motive for concealing the truth; her father was dead, and she was innocent—in the eye of the law.

Her father had suspected her intimacy with the count, without being quite convinced of the fact. He had several times accused her of it, but she had always repelled his accusations with indignation, without, however, entirely allaying his distrust.

The night of the murder, she was to have had an interview with the count in the park, but her lover did not come at the appointed time, and she walked toward the chateau in the hope of meeting him, or at least ascertaining the cause of his delay. She saw him approaching the library, and, curious to learn his motive for being in this distant part of the garden, she cautiously glided along to watch his movements. But suddenly, by the light of the moon, she perceived that someone was following her, and soon discovered that it was her father.

Struck with terror, she concealed herself behind a clump of bushes. The gamekeeper, having lost sight of her, was undecided for a moment as to what course to pursue. But having heard a noise in the direction of the library, and supposing that his daughter had taken refuge there, he hastened to the spot. He found the window open and the count about entering through it, in spite of the efforts of a woman to prevent his doing so. He did not for a moment doubt that this woman was his daughter, who, terrified by the sight of her father, wished to prevent her lover's following her into the room.

Certain of his child's dishonor, and deaf to everything but his rage and mortification, he approached the window with stealthy steps and plunged the knife to the hilt in the bosom of the count, just as the latter was about to spring into the room.

The count fell at once. The gamekeeper turned suddenly and beheld his daughter at his side. Divining her father's purpose, the wretched girl had sprung after him, a prey to the wildest agony, but she reached him too late. She led him home. He wished at once to give himself into the hands of justice, but finding that the murder was not discovered he had remained silent, to protect the honor of his child.

Man's justice could not call to account this wretched girl, whose levity had been productive of such terrible results. What punishment God's justice may have had in store for her I know not. I am ignorant even of her fate.

As Alice Braun—or, rather, Madame Weston—had anticipated, Anthony returned at the expiration of a week. But he did not come alone; Harry Weston accompanied him. The terrible position in which his wife was placed had decided the young Englishman to inform his parents of his marriage, and after a time they had consented to receive the wife of his choice.

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I might have told this history in a more dramatic manner. I could, for instance, have introduced Alice's husband at the moment when she was accused of the murder, and have rendered, by the turning of a few incidents, the evidence against her still more overwhelming.

But I have only wished to relate a strange incident in criminal history, and to relate it precisely as it took place. Besides, is not such a story, without any embellishments, sufficiently replete with anguish and with tears?

Word Count: 13,100

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To see the 5 illustrations that originally accompanied this story, [click here](#) and you will be redirected to *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*.

This story was written in German by Jodocus Temme and published in 1858 as "Ein Gottesgericht."