

Can a Life Hide Itself?

by Bayard Taylor

I HAD been reading, as is my wont from time to time, one of the many volumes of “The New Pitaval,” that singular record of human crime and human cunning, and also of the inevitable fatality which, in every case, leaves a gate open for detection. Were it not for the latter fact, indeed, one would turn with loathing from such endless chronicles of wickedness. Yet these may be safely contemplated, when one has discovered the incredible fatuity of crime, the certain weak mesh in a network of devilish texture; or is it rather the agency of a power outside of man, a subtle protecting principle, which allows the operation of the evil element only that the latter may finally betray itself? Whatever explanation we may choose, the fact is there, like a tonic medicine distilled from poisonous plants, to brace our faith in the ascendancy of Good in the government of the world.

Laying aside the book, I fell into a speculation concerning the mixture of the two elements in man’s nature. The life of an individual is usually, it seemed to me, a series of *results*, the processes leading to which are not often visible, or observed when they are so. Each act is the precipitation of a number of mixed influences, more or less unconsciously felt; the qualities of good and evil are so blended therein, that they defy the keenest moral analysis; and how shall we, then, pretend to judge of anyone? Perhaps the surest indication of evil (I further reflected) is that it always tries to conceal itself, and the strongest incitement to good is that evil cannot be concealed. The crime, or the vice, or even the self-acknowledged weakness, becomes a part of the individual consciousness; it cannot be forgotten or outgrown. It follows a life through all experiences and to the uttermost ends of the earth, pressing towards the light with a terrible, demoniac power. There are noteless lives, of course—lives that accept obscurity, mechanically run their narrow round of circumstance, and are lost; but when a life endeavors to lose itself—to hide some conscious guilt or failure—can it succeed? Is it not thereby lifted above the level of common experience, compelling attention to itself by the very endeavor to escape it?

I turned these questions over in my mind, without approaching, or indeed expecting, any solution—since I knew, from habit, the labyrinths into which they would certainly lead me—when a visitor was announced. It was one of the directors of our county almshouse, who came on an errand to which he attached no great importance. I owed the visit, apparently, to the circumstance that my home lay in his way, and he could at once relieve his conscience of a very trifling pressure and his pocket of a small package, by calling upon me. His story was told in a few words; the package was placed upon my table, and I was again left to my meditations.

Two or three days before, a man who had the appearance of a “tramp” had been observed by the people of a small village in the neighborhood. He stopped and looked at the houses in a vacant way, walked back and forth once or twice as if uncertain which of the crossroads to take, and presently went on without begging or even speaking to anyone. Towards sunset a farmer, on his way to the village store, found him sitting at the roadside, his head resting against a fencepost. The man’s face was so worn and exhausted that the farmer kindly stopped and addressed him; but he gave no other reply than a shake of the head.

The farmer thereupon lifted him into his light country-wagon, the man offering no resistance, and drove to the tavern, where, his exhaustion being so evident, a glass of whiskey was administered to him. He afterwards spoke a few words in German, which no one understood. At the almshouse, to which he was transported the same evening, he refused to answer the customary questions, although he appeared to understand them. The physician was obliged to use a slight degree of force in administering nourishment and medicine, but neither was of any avail. The man died within twenty-four hours after being received. His pockets were empty, but two small leathern wallets were found under his pillow; and these formed the package which the director left in my charge. They were full of papers in a foreign language, he said, and he supposed I might be able to ascertain the stranger's name and home from them.

I took up the wallets, which were worn and greasy from long service, opened them, and saw that they were filled with scraps, fragments, and folded pieces of paper, nearly every one of which had been carried for a long time loose in the pocket. Some were written in pen and ink, and some in pencil, but all were equally brown, worn, and unsavory in appearance. In turning them over, however, my eye was caught by some slips in the Russian character, and three or four notes in French; the rest were German. I laid aside "Pitaval" at once, emptied all the leathern pockets carefully, and set about examining the pile of material.

I first ran rapidly through the papers to ascertain the dead man's name, but it was nowhere to be found. There were half a dozen letters, written on sheets folded and addressed in the fashion which prevailed before envelopes were invented; but the name was cut out of the address in every case. There was an official permit to embark on board a Bremen steamer, mutilated in the same way; there was a card photograph, from which the face had been scratched by a penknife. There were Latin sentences; accounts of expenses; a list of New York addresses, covering eight pages; and a number of notes, written either in Warsaw or Breslau. A more incongruous collection I never saw, and I am sure that, had it not been for the train of thought I was pursuing when the director called upon me, I should have returned the papers to him without troubling my head with any attempt to unravel the man's story.

The evidence, however, that he had endeavored to hide his life, had been revealed by my first superficial examination; and here, I reflected, was a singular opportunity to test both his degree of success and my own power of constructing a coherent history out of the detached fragments. Unpromising as is the matter, said I, let me see whether he can conceal his secret from even such unpractised eyes as mine.

I went through the papers again, read each one rapidly, and arranged them in separate files, according to the character of their contents. Then I rearranged these latter in the order of time, so far as it was indicated; and afterwards commenced the work of picking out and threading together whatever facts might be noted. The first thing I ascertained, or rather conjectured, was, that the man's life might be divided into three very distinct phases, the first ending in Breslau, the second in Poland, and the third and final one in America. Thereupon I once again rearranged the material, and attacked that which related to the first phase.

It consisted of the following papers: three letters, in a female hand, commencing "my dear brother," and terminating with "thy loving sister, Elise"; part of a diploma from a gymnasium, or

high school, certifying that [here the name was cut out] had successfully passed his examination, and was competent to teach—and here again, whether by accident or design, the paper was torn off; a note, apparently to a jeweller, ordering a certain gold ring to be delivered to “Otto,” and signed “B. v. H.”; a receipt from the package-post for a box forwarded to Warsaw, to the address of Count Ladislas Kasinsky; and finally, a washing-list, at the bottom of which was written, in pencil, in a trembling hand: “May God protect thee! But do not stay away so very long.”

In the second collection, relating to Poland, I found the following: Six orders in Russian and three in French, requesting somebody to send by “Jean” sums of money, varying from two to eight hundred rubles. These orders were in the same hand, and all signed “Y.” A charming letter in French, addressed “*cher ami*,” and declining, in the most delicate and tender way, an offer of marriage made to the sister of the writer, of whose signature only “Amélie de” remained, the family name having been torn off. A few memoranda of expenses, one of which was curious: “Dinner with Jean, 58 rubles”; and immediately after it: “Doctor, 10 rubles.” There were, moreover, a leaf torn out of a journal, and half of a note which had been torn down the middle, both implicating “Jean” in some way with the fortunes of the dead man.

The papers belonging to the American phase, so far as they were to be identified by dates, or by some internal evidence, were fewer, but even more enigmatical in character. The principal one was a list of addresses in New York, divided into sections, the street boundaries of which were given. There were no names, but some of the addresses were marked +, and others ?, and a few had been crossed out with a pencil. Then there were some leaves of a journal of diet and bodily symptoms, of a very singular character; three fragments of drafts of letters, in pencil, one of them commencing, “Dog and villain!” and a single note of “Began work, September 10th, 1865.” This was about a year before his death.

The date of the diploma given by the gymnasium at Breslau was June 27, 1855, and the first date in Poland was May 3, 1861. Belonging to the time between these two periods there were only the order for the ring (1858), and a little memorandum in pencil, dated “Posen, Dec., 1859.” The last date in Poland was March 18, 1863, and the permit to embark at Bremen was dated in October of that year. Here, at least, was a slight chronological framework. The physician who attended the county almshouse had estimated the man’s age at thirty, which, supposing him to have been nineteen at the time of receiving the diploma, confirmed the dates to that extent.

I assumed, at the start, that the name which had been so carefully cut out of all the documents was the man’s own. The “Elise” of the letters was therefore his sister. The first two letters related merely to “mother’s health,” and similar details, from which it was impossible to extract anything, except that the sister was in some kind of service. The second letter closed with: “I have enough work to do, but I keep well. Forget thy disappointment so far as *I* am concerned, for I never expected anything; I don’t know why, but I never did.”

Here was a disappointment, at least, to begin with. I made a note of it opposite the date, on my blank programme, and took up the next letter. It was written in November, 1861, and contained a passage which keenly excited my curiosity. It ran thus: “Do, pray, be more careful of thy money. It may be all as thou sayest, and inevitable, but I dare not mention the thing to mother, and five thalers is all I can spare out of my own wages. As for thy other request, I have granted it, as thou

seest, but it makes me a little anxious. What is the joke? And how can it serve thee? That is what I do not understand, and I have plagued myself not a little to guess.”

Among the Polish memoranda was this: “Sept. 1 to Dec. 1, 200 rubles,” which I assumed to represent a salary. This would give him eight hundred a year, at least twelve times the amount which his sister—who must either have been cook or housekeeper, since she spoke of going to market for the family—could have received. His application to her for money, and the manner of her reference to it, indicated some imprudence or irregularity on his part. What the “other request” was, I could not guess; but as I was turning and twisting the worn leaf in some perplexity, I made a sudden discovery. One side of the bottom edge had been very slightly doubled over in folding, and as I smoothed it out, I noticed some diminutive letters in the crease. The paper had been worn nearly through, but I made out the words: “Write very soon, dear Otto!”

This was the name in the order for the gold ring, signed “B. v. H.”—a link, indeed, but a fresh puzzle. Knowing the stubborn prejudices of caste in Germany, and above all in Eastern Prussia and Silesia, I should have been compelled to accept “Otto,” whose sister was in service, as himself the servant of “B. v. H.,” but for the tenderly respectful letter of “Amélie de ——,” declining the marriage offer for her sister. I re-read this letter very carefully, to determine whether it was really intended for “Otto.” It ran thus:—

“DEAR FRIEND—I will not say that your letter was entirely unexpected, either to Helmine or myself. I should, perhaps, have less faith in the sincerity of your attachment, if you had not already involuntarily betrayed it. When I say that, although I detected the inclination of your heart some weeks ago, and that I also saw it was becoming evident to my sister, yet I refrained from mentioning the subject at all until she came to me last evening with your letter in her hand—when I say this, you will understand that I have acted towards you with the respect and sympathy which I profoundly feel. Helmine fully shares this feeling, and her poor heart is too painfully moved to allow her to reply. Do I not say, in saying this, what her reply must be? But, though her heart cannot respond to your love, she hopes you will always believe her a friend to whom your proffered devotion was an honor, and will be—if you will subdue it to her deserts—a grateful thing to remember. We shall remain in Warsaw a fortnight longer, as I think yourself will agree that it is better we should not immediately return to the castle. Jean, who must carry a fresh order already, will bring you this, and we hope to have good news of Henri. I send back the papers, which were unnecessary; we never doubted you, and we shall of course keep your secret so long as you choose to wear it.

“AMÉLIE DE ——”

The more light I seemed to obtain, the more inexplicable the circumstances became. The diploma and the note of salary were grounds for supposing that “Otto” occupied the position of tutor in a noble Polish family. There was the receipt for a box addressed to Count Ladislas Kasinsky, and I temporarily added his family name to the writer of the French letter, assuming her to be his wife. “Jean” appeared to be a servant, and “Henri” I set down as the son whom Otto was instructing in the castle or family seat in the country, while the parents were in Warsaw. Plausible, so far; but the letter was not such a one as a countess would have written to her son’s

tutor, under similar circumstances. It was addressed to a social equal, apparently to a man younger than herself, and for whom—supposing him to have been a tutor, secretary, or something of the kind—she must have felt a special sympathy. Her mention of “the papers” and “your secret” must refer to circumstances which would explain the mystery. “So long as you choose to *wear* it,” she had written; then it was certainly a secret connected with his personal history.

Further, it appeared that “Jean” was sent to him with “an order.” What could this be, but one of the nine orders for money, which lay before my eyes? I examined the dates of the latter, and lo! there was one written upon the same day as the lady’s letter. The sums drawn by these orders amounted in all to four thousand two hundred rubles. But how should a tutor or secretary be in possession of his employer’s money? Still, this might be accounted for; it would imply great trust on the part of the latter, but no more than one man frequently reposes in another. Yet, if it were so, one of the memoranda confronted me with a conflicting fact: “Dinner with Jean, 58 rubles.” The unusual amount—nearly fifty dollars—indicated an act of the most reckless dissipation, and in company with a servant, if “Jean,” as I could scarcely doubt, acted in that character. I finally decided to assume both these conjectures as true, and apply them to the remaining testimony.

I first took up the leaf which had been torn out of a small journal or pocket notebook, as was manifested by the red edge on three sides. It was scribbled over with brief notes in pencil, written at different times. Many of them were merely mnemonic signs; but the recurrence of the letters J and Y seemed to point to transactions with “Jean,” and the drawer of the various sums of money. The letter Y reminded me that I had been too hasty in giving the name of Kasinsky to the noble family; indeed, the name upon the post office receipt might have no connection with the matter I was trying to investigate. Suddenly I noticed a “Ky” among the mnemonic signs, and the suspicion flashed across my mind that Count Kasinsky had signed the orders with the last letter of his family name! To assume this, however, suggested a secret reason for doing so; and I began to think that I had already secrets enough on hand.

The leaf was much rubbed and worn, and it was not without considerable trouble that I deciphered the following (omitting the unintelligible signs):—

“Oct. 30 (Nov. 12)—talk with Y: 20—Jean. Consider.

“Nov. 15—with J—H—hope.

“Dec. 1—Told the C. No knowledge of S—therefore safe. Uncertain of —— C. to Warsaw. Met J. as agreed. Further and further.

“Dec. 27—All for naught! All for naught!

“Jan. 19, '63.—Sick. What is to be the end? Threats. No tidings of Y. Walked the streets all day. At night as usual.

“March 1.—News. The C. and H. left yesterday. No more to hope. Let it come, then!”

These broken words warmed my imagination powerfully. Looking at them in the light of my conjecture, I was satisfied that “Otto” was involved in some crime, or dangerous secret, of which “Jean” was either the instigator or the accomplice. “Y.,” or Count Kasinsky—and I was more than ever inclined to connect the two—also had his mystery, which might, or might not, be identical with the first. By comparing dates, I found that the entry made December 27 was three days later than the date of the letter of “Amélie de —”; and the exclamation “All for naught!” certainly referred to the disappointment it contained. I now guess the “H.” in the second entry to mean “Helmine.” The last two suggested a removal to Warsaw from the country. Here was a little more ground to stand on; but how should I ever get at the secret?

I took up the torn half of a note, which, after the first inspection, I had laid aside as a hopeless puzzle. A closer examination revealed several things which failed to impress me at the outset. It was written in a strong and rather awkward masculine hand; several words were underscored, two misspelled, and I felt—I scarcely knew why—that it was written in a spirit of mingled contempt and defiance. Let me give the fragment just as it lay before me:—

“ARON!

It is quite time
be done. Who knows
is not his home by this
concern for the
that they are well off,
sian officers are
cide at once, my
risan, or I must
t ten days delay
money can be divi-
tier, and you may
ever you please.
untess goes, and she
will know who you
time, unless you carry
friend or not
decide,
ann Helm.”

Here, I felt sure, was the clew to much of the mystery. The first thing that struck me was the appearance of a new name. I looked at it again, ran through in my mind all possible German names, and found that it could only be “Johann,”—and, in the same instant, I recalled the frequent habit of the Prussian and Polish nobility of calling their German valets by French names. This, then, was “Jean!” The address was certainly “Baron,” and why thrice underscored, unless in contemptuous satire? Light began to break upon the matter at last. “Otto” had been playing the part, perhaps assuming the name, of a nobleman, seduced to the deception by his passion for the Countess’s sister, Helmine. This explained the reference to “the papers,” and “the secret,” and would account for the respectful and sympathetic tone of the Countess’s letter. But

behind this there was certainly another secret, in which “Y.” (whoever he might be) was concerned, and which related to money. The close of the note, which I filled out to read, “Your friend or not, as you may decide,” conveyed a threat, and, to judge from the halves of lines immediately preceding it, the threat referred to the money, as well as to the betrayal of an assumed character.

Here, just as the story began to appear in faint outline, my discoveries stopped for a while. I ascertained the breadth of the original note by a part of the middle crease which remained, filled out the torn paper with blank paper, completed the divided words in the same character of manuscript, and endeavored to guess the remainder, but no clairvoyant power of divination came to my aid. I turned over the letters again, remarking the neatness with which the addresses had been cut off, and wondering why the man had not destroyed the letters and other memoranda entirely, if he wished to hide a possible crime. The fact that they were not destroyed showed the hold which his past life had had upon him, even to his dying hour. Weak and vain, as I already suspected him to be—wanting in all manly fibre, and of the very material which a keen, energetic villain would mould to his needs—I felt that his love for his sister and for “Helmine,” and other associations connected with his life in Germany and Poland, had made him cling to these worn records.

I know not what gave me the suspicion that he had not even found the heart to destroy the excised names; perhaps the care with which they had been removed; perhaps, in two instances, the circumstance of their taking words out of the body of the letters with them. But the suspicion came, and led to a re-examination of the leathern wallets. I could scarcely believe my eyes, when, feeling something rustle faintly as I pressed the thin lining of an inner pocket, I drew forth three or four small pellets of paper, and, unrolling them, found the lost addresses! I fitted them to the vacant places, and found that the first letters of the sister in Breslau had been forwarded to “Otto Lindenschmidt,” while the letter to Poland was addressed “Otto von Herisau.”

I warmed with this success, which exactly tallied with the previous discoveries, and returned again to the Polish memoranda. The words “[Rus]-sian officers” in “Jean’s” note led me to notice that it had been written towards the close of the last insurrection in Poland—a circumstance which immediately coupled with some things in the note and on the leaf of the journal. “No tidings of Y” might indicate that Count Kasinsky had been concerned in the rebellion, and had fled, or been taken prisoner. Had he left a large amount of funds in the hands of the supposed Otto von Herisau, which were drawn from time to time by orders, the form of which had been previously agreed upon? Then, when he had disappeared, might it not have been the remaining funds which Jean urged Otto to divide with him, while the latter, misled and entangled, in deception rather than naturally dishonest, held back from such a step? I could hardly doubt so much, and it now required but a slight effort of the imagination to complete the torn note.

The next letter of the sister was addressed to Bremen. After having established so many particulars, I found it easily intelligible. “I have done what I can,” she wrote. “I put it in this letter; it is all I have. But do not ask me for money again; mother is ailing most of the time, and I have not yet dared to tell her all. I shall suffer great anxiety until I hear that the vessel has sailed. My mistress is very good; she has given me an advance on my wages, or I could not have sent

thee anything. Mother thinks thou art still in Leipzig: why didst thou stay there so long? but no difference; thy money would have gone anyhow.”

It was nevertheless singular that Otto should be without money, so soon after the appropriation of Count Kasinsky’s funds. If the “20” in the first memorandum on the leaf meant “twenty thousand rubles,” as I conjectured, and but four thousand two hundred were drawn by the Count previous to his flight or imprisonment, Otto’s half of the remainder would amount to nearly eight thousand rubles; and it was, therefore, not easy to account for his delay in Leipzig, and his destitute condition.

Before examining the fragments relating to the American phase of his life—which illustrated his previous history only by occasional revelations of his moods and feelings—I made one more effort to guess the cause of his having assumed the name of “von Herisau.” The initials signed to the order for the ring (“B. v. H.”) certainly stood for the same family name; and the possession of papers belonging to one of the family was an additional evidence that Otto had either been in the service of, or was related to, some Von Herisau. Perhaps a sentence in one of the sister’s letters—“Forget thy disappointment so far as *I* am concerned, for I never expected anything”—referred to something of the kind. On the whole, service seemed more likely than kinship; but in that case the papers must have been stolen.

I had endeavored, from the start, to keep my sympathies out of the investigation, lest they should lead me to misinterpret the broken evidence, and thus defeat my object. It must have been the Countess’s letter, and the brief, almost stenographic, signs of anxiety and unhappiness on the leaf of the journal, that first beguiled me into a commiseration, which the simple devotion and self-sacrifice of the poor, toiling sister failed to neutralize. However, I detected the feeling at this stage of the examination, and turned to the American records, in order to get rid of it.

The principal paper was the list of addresses of which I have spoken. I looked over it in vain, to find some indication of its purpose; yet it had been carefully made out and much used. There was no name of a person upon it—only numbers and streets, one hundred and thirty-eight in all. Finally, I took these, one by one, to ascertain if any of the houses were known to me, and found three, out of the whole number, to be the residences of persons whom I knew. One was a German gentleman, and the other two were Americans who had visited Germany. The riddle was read! During a former residence in New York, I had for a time been quite overrun by destitute Germans—men, apparently, of some culture, who represented themselves as theological students, political refugees, or unfortunate clerks and secretaries—soliciting assistance. I found that, when I gave to one, a dozen others came within the next fortnight; when I refused, the persecution ceased for about the same length of time. I became convinced, at last, that these persons were members of an organized society of beggars, and the result proved it; for when I made it an inviolable rule to give to no one who could not bring me an indorsement of his need by some person whom I knew, the annoyance ceased altogether.

The meaning of the list of addresses was now plain. My nascent commiseration for the man was not only checked, but I was in danger of changing my *role* from that of the culprit’s counsel to that of prosecuting attorney.

When I took up again the fragment of the first draught of a letter, commencing, “Dog and villain!” and applied it to the words “Jean” or “Johann Helm,” the few lines which could be deciphered became full of meaning. “Don’t think,” it began, “that I have forgotten you, or the trick you played me! If I was drunk or drugged last night, I know how it happened, for all that. I left, but I shall go back. And if you make use of” (here some words were entirely obliterated)... “is true. He gave me the ring, and meant”... This was all I could make out. The other papers showed only scattered memoranda, of money, or appointments, or addresses, with the exception of the diary in pencil.

I read the letter attentively, and at first with very little idea of its meaning. Many of the words were abbreviated, and there were some arbitrary signs. It ran over a period of about four months, terminating six weeks before the man’s death. He had been wandering about the country during this period, sleeping in woods and barns, and living principally upon milk. The condition of his pulse and other physical functions was scrupulously set down, with an occasional remark of “good” or “bad.” The conclusion was at last forced upon me that he had been endeavoring to commit suicide by a slow course of starvation and exposure. Either as the cause or the result of this attempt, I read, in the final notes, signs of an aberration of mind. This also explained the singular demeanor of the man when found, and his refusal to take medicine or nourishment. He had selected a long way to accomplish his purpose, but had reached the end at last.

The confused material had now taken shape: the dead man, despite his will, had confessed to me his name and the chief events of his life. It now remained—looking at each event as the result of a long chain of causes—to deduce from them the elements of his individual character, and then fill up the inevitable gaps in the story from the probabilities of the operation of those elements. This was not so much a mere venture as the reader may suppose, because the two actions of the mind test each other. If they cannot, thus working towards a point and back again, actually discover what *was*, they may at least fix upon a very probable *might have been*.

A person accustomed to detective work would have obtained my little stock of facts with much less trouble, and would, almost instinctively, have filled the blanks as he went along. Being an apprentice in such matters, I had handled the materials awkwardly. I will not here retrace my own mental zigzags between character and act, but simply repeat the story as I finally settled and accepted it.

Otto Lindenschmidt was the child of poor parents in or near Breslau. His father died when he was young; his mother earned a scanty subsistence as a washerwoman; his sister went into service. Being a bright, handsome boy, he attracted the attention of a Baron von Herisau, an old, childless, eccentric gentleman, who took him first as page or attendant, intending to make him a superior *valet de chambre*. Gradually, however, the Baron fancied that he detected in the boy a capacity for better things; his condescending feeling of protection had grown into an attachment for the handsome, amiable, grateful young fellow, and he placed him in the gymnasium at Breslau, perhaps with the idea, now, of educating him to be an intelligent companion.

The boy and his humble relatives, dazzled by this opportunity, began secretly to consider the favor as almost equivalent to his adoption as a son. (The Baron had once been married, but his wife and only child had long been dead.) The old man, of course, came to look upon the growing

intelligence of the youth as his own work: vanity and affection became inextricably blended in his heart, and when the *cursus* was over, he took him home as the companion of his lonely life. After two or three years, during which the young man was acquiring habits of idleness and indulgence, supposing his future secure, the Baron died—perhaps too suddenly to make full provision for him, perhaps after having kept up the appearance of wealth on a life-annuity, but, in any case, leaving very little, if any, property to Otto. In his disappointment, the latter retained certain family papers which the Baron had entrusted to his keeping. The ring was a gift, and he wore it in remembrance of his benefactor.

Wandering about, Micawber-like, in hopes that something might turn up, he reached Posen, and there either met or heard of the Polish Count, Ladislav Kasinsky, who was seeking a tutor for his only son. His accomplishments, and perhaps, also, a certain aristocratic grace of manner unconsciously caught from the Baron von Herisau, speedily won for him the favor of the Count and Countess Kasinsky, and emboldened him to hope for the hand of the Countess's sister, Helmine ——, to whom he was no doubt sincerely attached. Here Johann Helm, or "Jean," a confidential servant of the Count, who looked upon the new tutor as a rival, yet adroitly flattered his vanity for the purpose of misleading and displacing him, appears upon the stage. "Jean" first detected Otto's passion; "Jean," at an epicurean dinner, wormed out of Otto the secret of the Herisau documents, and perhaps suggested the part which the latter afterwards played.

This "Jean" seemed to me to have been the evil agency in the miserable history which followed. After Helmine's rejection of Otto's suit, and the flight or captivity of Count Kasinsky, leaving a large sum of money in Otto's hands, it would be easy for "Jean," by mingled persuasions and threats, to move the latter to flight, after dividing the money still remaining in his hands. After the theft, and the partition, which took place beyond the Polish frontier, "Jean," in turn, stole his accomplice's share, together with the Von Herisau documents.

Exile and a year's experience of organized mendicancy did the rest. Otto Lindenschmidt was one of those natures which possess no moral elasticity—which have neither the power nor the comprehension of atonement. The first real, unmitigated guilt—whether great or small—breaks them down hopelessly. He expected no chance of self-redemption, and he found none. His life in America was so utterly dark and hopeless, that the brightest moment in it must have been that which showed him the approach of death.

My task was done. I had tracked this weak, vain, erring, hunted soul to its last refuge, and the knowledge bequeathed to me but a single duty. His sins were balanced by his temptations; his vanity and weakness had revenged themselves; and there only remained to tell the simple, faithful sister that her sacrifices were no longer required. I burned the evidences of guilt, despair, and suicide, and sent the other papers, with a letter relating the time and circumstances of Otto Lindenschmidt's death, to the civil authorities of Breslau, requesting that they might be placed in the hands of his sister Elise.

This, I supposed, was the end of the history, so far as my connection with it was concerned. But one cannot track a secret with impunity; the fatality connected with the act and the actor clings even to the knowledge of the act. I had opened my door a little, in order to look out upon the life

of another, but in doing so a ghost had entered in, and was not to be dislodged until I had done its service.

In the summer of 1867 I was in Germany, and during a brief journey of idlesse and enjoyment came to the lovely little watering-place of Liebenstein, on the southern slope of the Thuringian Forst. I had no expectation, or even desire, of making new acquaintances among the gay company who took their afternoon coffee under the noble linden trees on the terrace; but, within the first hour of my after-dinner leisure, I was greeted by an old friend, an author, from Coburg, and carried away, in my own despite, to a group of his associates. My friend and his friends had already been at the place a fortnight, and knew the very tint and texture of its gossip. While I sipped my coffee, I listened to them with one ear, and to Wagner's overture to "Lohengrin" with the other; and I should soon have been wholly occupied with the fine orchestra, had I not been caught and startled by an unexpected name.

"Have you noticed," someone asked, "how much attention the Baron von Herisau is paying her?"

I whirled round and exclaimed, in a breath, "The Baron von Herisau!"

"Yes," said my friend; "do you know him?"

I was glad that three crashing, tremendous chords came from the orchestra just then, giving me time to collect myself before I replied: "I am not sure whether it is the same person: I knew a Baron von Herisau long ago: how old is the gentleman here?"

"About thirty-five, I should think," my friend answered.

"Ah, then it can't be the same person," said I: "still, if he should happen to pass near us, will you point him out to me?"

It was an hour later, and we were all hotly discussing the question of Lessing's obligations to English literature, when one of the gentlemen at the table said: "There goes the Baron von Herisau: is it perhaps your friend, sir?"

I turned and saw a tall man, with prominent nose, opaque black eyes, and black mustache, walking beside a pretty, insipid girl. Behind the pair went an elder couple, overdressed and snobbish in appearance. A carriage, with servants in livery, waited in the open space below the terrace, and, having received the two couples, whirled swiftly away towards Altenstein.

Had I been more of a philosopher I should have wasted no second thought on the Baron von Herisau. But the Nemesis of the knowledge which I had throttled poor Otto Lindenschmidt's ghost to obtain, had come to rest for me until I had discovered who and what was the Baron. The list of guests which the landlord gave me whetted my curiosity to a painful degree; for on it I found the entry; "Aug. 15.—Otto v. Herisau, *Rentier*, East Prussia."

It was quite dark when the carriage returned. I watched the company into the supper-room, and then, whisking in behind them, secured a place at the nearest table. I had an hour of quiet,

stealthy observation before my Coburg friend discovered me, and by that time I was glad of his company and had need of his confidence. But, before making use of him in the second capacity, I desired to make the acquaintance of the adjoining *partie carrée*. He had bowed to them familiarly in passing, and when the old gentleman said, "Will you not join us, Herr ——?" I answered my friend's interrogative glance with a decided affirmative, and we moved to the other able.

My seat was beside the Baron von Herisau, with whom I exchanged the usual commonplaces after an introduction. His manner was cold and taciturn, I thought, and there was something forced in the smile which accompanied his replies to the remarks of the coarse old lady, who continually referred to the "Herr Baron" as authority upon every possible subject. I noticed, however, that he cast a sudden, sharp glance at me, when I was presented to the company as an American.

The man's neighborhood disturbed me. I was obliged to let the conversation run in the channels already selected, and stupid enough I found them. I was considering whether I should not give a signal to my friend and withdraw, when the Baron stretched his hand across the table for a bottle of Affenthaler, and I caught sight of a massive gold ring on his middle finger. Instantly I remembered the ring which "B. v. H." had given to Otto Lindenschmidt, and I said to myself, "That is it!" The inference followed like lightning that it was "Johann Helm" who sat beside me, and not a Baron von Herisau!

That evening my friend and I had a long, absorbing conversation in my room. I told him the whole story, which came back vividly to memory, and learned, in return, that the reputed Baron was supposed to be wealthy, that the old gentleman was a Bremen merchant or banker, known to be rich, that neither was considered by those who had met them to be particularly intelligent or refined, and that the wooing of the daughter had already become so marked as to be a general subject of gossip. My friend was inclined to think my conjecture correct, and willingly co-operated with me in a plan to test the matter. We had no considerable sympathy with the snobbish parents, whose servility to a title was so apparent; but the daughter seemed to be an innocent and amiable creature, however silly, and we determined to spare her the shame of an open scandal.

If our scheme should seem a little melodramatic, it must not be forgotten that my friend was an author. The next morning, as the Baron came up the terrace after his visit to the spring, I stepped forward and greeted him politely, after which I said: "I see by the strangers' list that you are from East Prussia, Baron; have you ever been in Poland?" At that moment, a voice behind him called out rather sharply, "Jean!" The Baron started, turned round and then back to me, and all his art could not prevent the blood from rushing to his face. I made, as if by accident, a gesture with my hand, indicating success, and went a step further.

"Because," said I, "I am thinking of making a visit to Cracow and Warsaw, and should be glad of any information—"

"Certainly!" he interrupted me, "and I should be very glad to give it, if I had ever visited Poland."

“At least,” I continued, “you can advise me upon one point; but excuse me, shall we not sit down a moment yonder? As my question relates to money, I should not wish to be overheard.”

I pointed out a retired spot, just before reaching which we were joined by my friend, who suddenly stepped out from behind a clump of lilacs. The Baron and he saluted each other.

“Now,” said I to the former, “I can ask your advice, Mr. Johann Helm!”

He was not an adept, after all. His astonishment and confusion were brief, to be sure, but they betrayed him so completely that his after-impulse to assume a haughty, offended air only made us smile.

“If I had a message to you from Otto Lindenschmidt, what then?” I asked.

He turned pale, and presently stammered out, “He—he is dead!”

“Now,” said my friend, “it is quite time to drop the mask before us. You see we know you, and we know your history. Not from Otto Lindenschmidt alone; Count Ladislav Kasinsky—”

“What! Has he come back from Siberia?” exclaimed Johann Helm. His face expressed abject terror; I think he would have fallen upon his knees before us, if he had not somehow felt, by a rascal’s instinct, that we had no personal wrongs to redress in unmasking him.

Our object, however, was to ascertain through him the complete facts of Otto Lindenschmidt’s history, and then to banish him from Liebenstein. We allowed him to suppose for awhile that we were acting under the authority of persons concerned, in order to make the best possible use of his demoralized mood, for we knew it would not last long.

My guesses were very nearly correct. Otto Lindenschmidt had been educated by an old Baron, Bernhard von Herisau, on account of his resemblance in person to a dead son, whose name had also been Otto. He could not have adopted the plebeian youth, at least to the extent of giving him an old and haughty name, but this the latter nevertheless expected, up to the time of the Baron’s death. He had inherited a little property from his benefactor, but soon ran through it. “He was a light-headed fellow,” said Johann Helm, “but he knew how to get the confidence of the old *Junkers*. If he hadn’t been so cowardly and fidgety, he might have made himself a career.”

The Polish episode differed so little from my interpretation that I need not repeat Helm’s version. He denied having stolen Otto’s share of the money, but could not help admitting his possession of the Von Herisau papers, among which were the certificates of birth and baptism of the old Baron’s son, Otto. It seems that he had been fearful of Lindenschmidt’s return from America, for he had managed to communicate with the sister in Breslau, and in this way learned the former’s death. Not until then had he dared to assume his present disguise.

We let him go, after exacting a solemn pledge that he would betake himself at once to Hamburg, and there ship for Australia. (I judged that America was already amply supplied with individuals

of his class.) The sudden departure of the Baron von Herisau was a two days' wonder at Liebenstein; but besides ourselves, only the Bremen banker knew the secret. He also left, two days afterwards, with his wife and daughter—their cases, it was reported, requiring Kissingen.

Otto Lindenschmidt's life, therefore, could not hide itself. Can any life?

The Atlantic Monthly, May 1869