

Von Schlegel had thrown himself upon him with a wild cry and uplifted weapon, but the student was stout-hearted and resolute. He rushed inside the sweep of the hatchet and caught his assailant round the waist, narrowly escaping a blow which would have cloven his head. The two staggered for a moment in a deadly wrestle, Schlegel endeavoring to shorten his weapon; but Strauss with a desperate wrench managed to bring him to the ground, and they rolled together in the snow, Strauss clinging to the other's right arm and shouting frantically for assistance. It was as well that he did so, for Schlegel would certainly have succeeded in freeing his arm had it not been for the arrival of two stalwart gendarmes attracted by the uproar. Even then the three of them found it difficult to overcome the maniacal strength of Schlegel, and they were utterly unable to wrench the silver hatchet from his grasp. One of the gendarmes, however, had a coil of rope round his waist, with which he rapidly secured the student's arms to his sides. In this way, half pushed, half dragged, he was conveyed to the central police-station.

Strauss assisted in coercing his former friend, and accompanied the police to the station, protesting loudly at the same time against any unnecessary violence, and giving it as his opinion that a lunatic asylum would be more fitting for the prisoner. What did it all mean? It was certain that his old friend from boyhood had attempted to murder him, and had nearly succeeded. Was Von Schlegel then the murderer of Professor von Hopstein and of the Bohemian Jew? Strauss felt that it was impossible, for the Jew was not even known to him, and the Professor had been his especial favorite. He followed mechanically, lost in amazement.

Inspector Baumgarten, one of the most energetic and best known of the police officials, was on duty in the absence of the Commissary. He was a wiry little active man, quiet and retiring in his habits, but possessed of great sagacity and a vigilance which never relaxed. Now, though he had had a six hour's vigil, he sat erect as ever, with his pen behind his ear, at the official desk, while his friend, Sub-Inspector Winkel, snored in a chair at the side of the stove. Even the inspector's usually immovable features betrayed surprise, however, when the door was flung open and Von Schlegel was dragged in with pale face and disordered clothes, the silver hatchet grasped firmly in his hand. Still more surprised was he when Strauss and the gendarmes gave their accounts.

"Young man, young man," said Inspector Baumgarten, laying down his pen, and fixing his eyes sternly upon the prisoner, "this is pretty work for Christmas morning; why have you done this thing?"

"God knows!" cried Von Schlegel, covering his face with his hands and dropping the hatchet. A change had come over him, his fury and excitement were gone, and he seemed utterly prostrated with grief.

"You have rendered yourself liable to a strong suspicion of having committed the other murders."

"No, no, God forbid!" cried Von Schlegel.

"At least, you are guilty of attempting the life of Herr Leopold Strauss."

"The dearest friend I have," groaned Otto.

"His being your friend makes your crime ten times more heinous," said the inspector severely. "Remove him for the remainder of the night to the—— But steady! Who come here?"

The door was pushed open, and a man came into the room, so haggard and care worn that he looked more like a ghost than a human being. He tottered as he walked, and had to clutch at the backs of the chairs as he approached the inspector's desk. It was hard to recognize in this miserable looking object the once cheerful and rubicund sub-curator of the museum and privat-docent of chemistry, Herr Schlessinger.

"Good-morning, mein Herr," said Inspector Baumgarten; "you are up early. No doubt you have heard that one of your students, Von Schlegel, is arrested for attempting the life of Leopold Strauss?"

"No; I have come for myself," said Schlessinger, speaking huskily, and putting his hand up to his throat. "I have come to ease my soul of the weight of a great sin, though, God knows, an unmeditated one. It was I who—— But, merciful heavens! there it is—the horrid thing! Oh, that I had never seen it."

He shrank back in a paroxysm of terror, glaring at the silver hatchet where it lay upon the floor, and pointing at it with his emaciated hand.

"There it lies!" he yelled. "Look at it! It has come to condemn me. See that brown rust on it! Do you know what that is? That is the blood of my dearest, best friend, Professor Von Hopstein. I saw it gush over the very handle as I drove the blade through his brain. Mein Gott, I see it now!"

"Sub-inspector Winkel," said Baumgarten, endeavoring to preserve his official austerity "you will arrest this man, charged on his own confession with the murder of the late Professor. I also deliver into your hands Von Schlegel here, charged with a murderous assault upon Herr Strauss. You will also keep this hatchet"—here he picked it up—"apparently used for both crimes."

Wilhelm Schlessinger had been leaning against the table, with a face ashy paleness. As the inspector ceased speaking, he looked up excitedly.

"What did you say?" he cried. "Von Schlegel attack Strauss! The two dearest friends in college! I slay my old master! It is magic, I say; it is a charm! There is a spell upon us! It is— Ah, I have it! It is that hatchet—that thrice accursed hatchet!" and he pointed convulsively at the weapon which Inspector Baumgarten still held in his hand.

The inspector smiled contemptuously.

"Restrain yourself, mein Herr," he said. "You do but make your case worse by such wild excuses for the wicked deed. Magic and charms are not known in the legal vocabulary, as my friend Winkel will assure you."

"I know not," remarked his sub-inspector, shrugging his broad shoulders. "There are many strange things in the world. Who knows but that——"

"What!" roared Inspector Baumgarten furiously. "You would undertake to contradict me! You would set up your own opinion! You would be the champion of these accursed murderers! Fool, miserable fool, your hour has come!" and rushing at the astounded Winkel, he dealt a blow at him with the silver hatchet which would certainly have justified his last assertion had it not been that, in his fury, he overlooked the lowness of the rafters above his head. The blade of the hatchet struck one of these, and remained there quivering, while the handle was splintered into a thousand pieces.

"What have I done?" gasped Baumgarten, falling back into his chair. "What have I done?"

"You have proved Herr Schlessinger's words to be correct," said Von Schlegel, stepping forward, for the astonished policeman had let go their grasp of him. "Against reason, science, and everything else though it be, there is a charm at work. But, see, what is that?"

Right in the centre of the room was lying a thin brown cylinder of parchment. One glance at the fragments of the handle of the weapon showed that it had been hollow. This roll of paper had apparently been hidden away inside the metal case thus formed, having been introduced through a small hole, afterwards soldered up. Von Schlegel opened the document. The writing upon it was almost illegible from age; but as far as they could make out it stood thus, in mediæval German:

"Diese Waffe benutzte Max von Erlichingen um Joanna Bodeck zu ermorden, deshalb beschuldige ich, Johanna Bodeck, mittelst der Macht, welche mir als Mitglied des Concils des rothen Kreuzes verliehen wurde, dieselbe mit dieser Unthat. Mag sie anderen denselben Schmerz verursachen, den sie mir verursacht hat. Mag jede Hand, die sie ergreift, mit dem Blut eines Freundes geröthet sein."