

Cobb Irvin Shrewsbury

The Spruce Street Tragedy; or, Old Spicer Handles a Double Mystery



Irvin Cobb

**The Spruce Street Tragedy; or, Old
Spicer Handles a Double Mystery**

«Public Domain»

Cobb I.

The Spruce Street Tragedy; or, Old Spicer Handles a Double Mystery /
I. Cobb — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I.	5
CHAPTER II.	9
CHAPTER III.	13
CHAPTER IV.	17
CHAPTER V.	22
CHAPTER VI.	25
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	27

Irvin S. Cobb

The Spruce Street Tragedy / or, Old Spicer Handles a Double Mystery

CHAPTER I.

THE SPRUCE STREET MURDER

"Hark! I thought I heard the outside door open and shut."

"No, it was nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure, Seth."

"What time is it now, Spicer?"

"Half-past seven."

"Half-past seven, and George not here yet!"

"He don't seem to have shown up, that's a fact."

"What can be keeping the fellow?"

"There you've got me, Seth. He's usually prompt enough, you know."

"That's so, old man; but I tell you what, if we're going to take hold of this case at all, we ought to be getting to work."

"I fully agree with you, and am most anxious not to lose the next Eastern-bound train."

"Confound it. I wish George would come. I don't want the regular men to get in ahead of us."

"It isn't that that I care so much about," said Old Spicer, quietly; "but I *do* hate to see a good case all muddled up."

"And so do I," exclaimed Stricket. "It makes me mad even now when I think of the way they managed such splendid cases as the Jennie Cramer, Rose Ambler, and half a dozen others like them."

"Did you hear who was going over to Stony Creek this morning?"

"Only Willett, so far as I could learn; and perhaps Medical Examiner Gaylord, of Branford."

"Well, I – "

"Hark! what's that? The outside door this time, eh?"

"You're right; he's come at last. Yes, that's George Morgan's footstep." Then, as some one knocked at the door of the room, "Come in, George," and a young man of some twenty-six or twenty-seven years entered.

"I'm glad to see you, George," continued the old detective, as the new-comer sank wearily into an arm-chair; "but I should have been better pleased to have welcomed you half an hour earlier."

"Yes," exclaimed Seth Stricket, quickly; "for goodness' sake, what's kept you, George?"

"My excuse for not being on time is a good one," responded George Morgan, gravely. "If it were not so, I think you both know me well enough to believe I wouldn't have occasion to offer any."

"I am sure of that," nodded Old Spicer.

"And so am I," added Seth; "but let's hear it all the same."

"Well, you know it was agreed among us, before we parted last night, that I should see Chief Bollmann before joining you this morning."

"Yes, that was the arrangement," assented Old Spicer.

"Of course, he wouldn't be at his office in the police building as early as six o'clock."

"Not likely," laughed Stricket.

"So, knowing that," continued George, "I started at once for his residence, No. 40 Sylvan Avenue."

His two listeners nodded.

"I went out George Street, expecting to turn off either before, or at least when, I reached York, but was so busy with my own thoughts that I had crossed York and was well on toward Spruce before I knew it."

"Well?"

"When I came to myself and saw where I was, I turned into Spruce Street, and walked toward Oak."

"For Heaven's sake, George," exclaimed Stricket, impatiently, "where are you driving to? Do get to Sylvan Avenue some time this morning."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Seth," replied the young man, with a grave smile; "but I am getting to the meat of my story, and to my excuse, pretty fast now."

"Let's have it then."

"Do you remember what used to be, and what is still called by some, the Turn Hall, on Spruce Street?"

"I do, very well," said Stricket. "The property belongs to old Mother Ernst, and she keeps a saloon – a fearfully low place – in the basement."

"You're right in one particular, Seth; it's low enough, in all conscience – clean under ground."

"I've heard of the woman," said Old Spicer. "She lives and sleeps in that low basement; in fact, it is said, she hardly ever shows herself above ground nowadays."

"That's true," affirmed Stricket; "she's seventy-two or – three years old, and she's lived in that damp basement so long, she's got the rheumatism the worst way, so that she can hardly waddle – has to use a cane."

"Well," continued George, "a milk-wagon was standing in front of the house, and just as I arrived abreast of the place, the milkman, Julius Smith, of East Haven, came rushing up the outside basement steps, his face as white as a sheet, his eyes bulging from their sockets, and his hair, so far as I could see it, fairly standing on end."

"I say, my man, what's the matter with you?" I demanded, seizing him by the arm, and giving him a shake to start up his ideas a little.

"Matter? matter?" he gasped; 'matter enough – murder's the matter!'

"What's that?" I demanded, sternly; 'what's that you say, sir?'

"I say the old woman lies murdered on a lounge, in her saloon down there,' and he pointed down the stone steps.

"What! Mrs. Ernst murdered?" exclaimed a voice at my side.

"I looked round, and saw that we had been joined by Henry M. Cohen, the watchmaker; and in less than a minute more there were at least a dozen people about us."

"You went into the house, of course, George?" said Old Spicer, inquiringly.

"Yes; the milkman, Cohen, and I entered the room where the dead body was stretched on the sofa."

"You got a good look at it, then, before it was disturbed?"

"Yes, when we first entered the old woman was lying on her left side, with her face to the wall."

"Had she been dead long, do you think?"

"Some hours, I should say – five or six, at least."

"Why do you think so?"

"I felt of her limbs; they were as cold as a stone."

"Had she been shot or stabbed?"

"Neither. Suffocated or chloroformed, it seemed to me."

"Was she bound and gagged?"

"Yes, sir; her hands were tied together at the wrists with an ordinary pocket handkerchief. Her heavy woolen-stockinged feet were also tied together; another handkerchief encircled her shins."

Around her throat and head was wrapped a sheet. That part of it which encircled the neck made a bandage so tight that it must have stopped her breathing soon after it was put into use. Her mouth was partially filled with another handkerchief."

"Hum," mused Old Spicer, "the murderers were well supplied with handkerchiefs, it seems."

"Yes, sir; and of this last one – the gag – I shall have more to say by and by. The ends of it so fell across her breast that, I should think, in her desperate struggle to breathe, she had probably forced the larger part of the handkerchief from her mouth."

"Were there no signs of blood?"

"There were a few drops on this very handkerchief, evidently from her nose; and I thought I discovered a bruise and a little blood on the back of her head."

"Then there had been something of a scuffle?"

"Well, as to that I can't exactly say. A superficial examination of the hands and head of the dead woman revealed no other signs indicative of a struggle or blows. Even at her throat, where generally, you know, finger-nail imprints are to be found on a person who has been strangled to death, there were no such confirmatory evidences of a struggle."

"How was she dressed, George?" asked Stricket.

"The clothes she had on," Cohen said, "were those she usually appeared in when at home."

"Were they disarranged in any way?"

"That portion of her attire that covered her breast had been torn apart, and a search made presumably for a pocket-book or a roll of bank bills which was believed to be secreted there."

"Ah-ha!" exclaimed Stricket, "the job must have been done by some one who knew the old woman, for there's where she always carried a good share of her money."

"That's not conclusive," said Old Spicer, with a shake of the head. "It's a well-known fact that many women carry their purses under the bosom of their dress."

"Yes," said George, "I've had occasion to notice that myself."

"Well," said Stricket, who was very much interested, "go on. What else did you notice?"

"I saw one of her great heavy black slippers on the floor at the foot of the sofa; the mate was on the right foot. On the sofa, alongside the dead body, was a black walking-stick."

"Ah!" said Stricket, "that has been her constant companion for the past fifteen years. Without it she couldn't have hobbled across her saloon."

"Were the rooms themselves very much disturbed?" asked Old Spicer.

"If the whole basement and its contents had been lifted right up and then scattered by a cyclone it could not have been in a more confused condition. I tell you, gentlemen, a house and its contents were never more thoroughly ransacked. Why, the solitary bedroom, where Cohen said Mrs. Ernst had slept for the past quarter of a century, was actually turned inside out. The bedtick was ripped open, and what it inclosed had been very industriously examined."

"The murderer or murderers made pretty thorough work of it, eh?" said Stricket, inquiringly.

"Of the bed?"

"Yes."

"From the way they went through it, Seth, I have precious little doubt they had good reason to believe the old woman had a big pile of money hid in the stuffing of that ticking."

"Oh-ho! and do you think they found it?"

"They may have found some, but not enough to satisfy them."

"How do you know that?"

"From the way they went at the rest of the furniture. For instance, one of those queer, old-fashioned bureaus, such as the hunter for the antique delights to discover, stood in the bedroom. Every drawer of it had been rifled, and the various articles, none of which appeared to be very valuable, strewn the floor."

"Any other piece of furniture that seemed to be a receptacle for hidden wealth of the occupant of the basement was completely overhauled. In the front room not a box, or a bundle, or a drawer, or a pail, or a corner was overlooked by the greedy eyes of the criminals. They meant business, I can tell you."

"Were any of the regular authorities on the ground before you came away?" asked Old Spicer, suddenly.

"Yes, the coroner, a police captain, and two or three detectives were there."

"Have they any idea who did the deed?"

"Not the slightest; they are completely at sea."

"Have you formed any theory yourself, George?"

"Well, to confess the truth, I have, sir."

"Let's hear it."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I should like to hear your opinion before I venture to express mine."

Old Spicer was silent for a moment, then he abruptly exclaimed:

"I should like to visit the scene of this tragedy. Suppose we go to Spruce Street at once, gentlemen."

"What! and give up the Stony Creek affair?" exclaimed Stricket, in astonishment.

"Not necessarily," was the reply.

"But I don't understand, Mark."

"I have an idea," rejoined Old Spicer, quietly, "that in this instance, the shortest road to Stony Creek lies through Spruce Street."

"Thunder!" ejaculated George Morgan, "I believe you are right."

"Come, then, let us be off at once," and a moment later the three detectives left the house.

CHAPTER II.

OLD SPICER VISITS THE SCENE OF THE MURDER

The conversation related in the preceding chapter had occurred in the back parlor of Old Spicer's residence in Home Place.

The great detective, who had now owned and occupied this house for some time, had fitted it up to suit his own fancy and convenience.

He resided there alone – that is, so far as family was concerned, for Mrs. Hettie Catlin, the widow of Frederic Catlin, was still his housekeeper, and they kept one servant-of-all-work, a middle-aged woman, upon whom the detective could thoroughly rely.

The back parlor looked out upon a small garden, and this room Old Spicer had chosen for his *sanctum sanctorum*, and furnished it accordingly.

It would have been a feast, even for the great Lecoq, to have been able to pay a visit to this retreat. The wonders and trophies it contained were legion, and furnished a history in epitome of all the cases Old Spicer had ever had a hand in.

Naturally the old man loved this room, and spent as much of his time in it as possible.

He had many friends, but few intimates. Those few, however, he delighted to receive within the sacred precincts of the back parlor, and for this reason George Morgan, his adopted son, had recently purchased a beautiful residence on Academy Street, the garden of which ran down to and adjoined the old detective's little yard, and between which the means of communication was a gate in the garden fence.

Seth Stricket, too, had taken up his residence in the neighborhood, having moved into a pretty cottage on Green Street, and thus Old Spicer had his two most reliable assistants close at hand.

On reaching the sidewalk the trio passed out of Home Place, crossed Olive Street, entered Court, and keeping on, soon arrived at the police building.

Here they stopped, and entering the office, made such inquiries of the officer in charge as Spicer deemed expedient.

Chief Bollmann was not there, neither were any of the prominent members of the detective force; they were over in Spruce Street and otherwheres, working on the new murder case.

Old Spicer determined to lose no more time; so, leaving the headquarters of the police, he and his friends walked to Church Street, where they hailed a carriage, and were swiftly driven to the dead woman's house.

George Morgan led the way down the blue stone steps to the basement, where the murder had been committed, and Old Spicer at once began to examine the place where the widow had made her home for so many years.

The building was quite a large one, and, as he knew, had been, in the early history of the Turn Verein in the city, a meeting place for that body.

It was two stories high above the basement, and divided into six tenements, all of which were occupied.

But it was the basement itself that interested Old Spicer most, and as he wandered about it he was forced to admit that it was a veritable Chinese puzzle.

The main apartment was, of course, the barroom, where for years Mrs. Ernst, and two of her three husbands before her, had sold beer and liquor.

The chief informed Spicer that up to the present year the widow had carried on the saloon business there under the usual authority. She had not, however, he said, renewed her license for the present year, although she expected to do so before the summer season set in. She was a dispenser, since her license expired, of temperance drinks ostensibly.

Old Spicer and those with him, in looking over the premises, soon discovered conclusive proof that she did not strictly interpret the license law. Ale barrels, beer kegs, and demijohns for whisky and other fiery liquors were scattered through the basement.

In the rear of the barroom was the bedroom. There were many more rooms in the basement. Fourteen inside doors led into the little rooms, each of which was furnished with one or two chairs, a lounge, table, and a stove. Most of these rooms could be reached from two or three different sides.

In the rear were two doors leading to the back yard, and a covered passage leading to a little alley through which York Street could be reached. Four doors opened out of the room where the body of Mrs. Ernst was discovered by the milkman.

No one who was unfamiliar with the premises had any idea that there were more than two rooms in the basement. The officials, Chief Bollmann, Coroner Mix, and all the detectives, including Spicer, Stricket and Morgan, who had a pretty good knowledge of the various haunts of vice in the city, were surprised to find such a thoroughly mixed-up piece of underground architecture.

Old Spicer, while inspecting the apartments and the several dark passages by which the rooms were reached, compared the surroundings, because of the abrupt and unexpected halls and turns, the scanty furnishings, and the like, to some of the celebrated structures that carried notoriety to the old Five Points in New York years ago.

In the southeast corner of the basement, where the uninitiated might expect to find a coal bin or a hole in the ground to store away wood, they discovered a room with three or four chairs and a lounge. Even the tenants on the floor above had no idea that there was such a room in existence.

One of the passages from the bedroom opened into what must have been a sort of social apartment for the patrons of the widow. It might also answer the purpose of a card or smoking-room. A cheap stove, a couple of tables, and three or four chairs comprised the furniture of this room.

Then there was discovered another apartment which was probably used as a storehouse for ale and beer barrels. Besides these there were found a woodshed and tool-room, and a suspicious looking trap-door that covered what Old Spicer was privately informed was a secret underground tunnel that extended far in the rear of the building.

He raised the heavy door and looked in; the entrance was nearly choked up with ashes.

He removed some of the rubbish with his foot, and peered eagerly into the black darkness. The hole had a mysterious look about it, and he could not but regard it with strong suspicion.

One of the tenants of the house approached, pointed to the black opening, mysteriously shrugged his shoulders, shook his head, and then mumbled, in what he meant to be a confidential tone:

"That there underground passage leads clear across the back-yard, Mister Detective; and just let me tell you it'll be a mighty interesting thoroughfare for you to inspect."

"Thoroughfare, eh?" questioned Old Spicer, thoughtfully.

"That's what I said, sir."

"Thank you for the hint, my friend; most likely I shall act upon it later." Then he closed the trap-door, and once more turned toward the bar-room.

This apartment was of comfortable dimensions, and was the principal room in the basement. It was furnished on the same scale of poverty as the rest, and the first glimpse into it would not have been very reassuring to the spectator. The bar resembled those that bloom in cheap grogeries.

There was an evident purpose on the part of the owner to keep the public from sharing the brilliancy of the interior, for a paper screen two and a half feet high and two feet wide stood at the end of the bar as a barrier to the glow of an oil lamp that shed its exclusive light through the gloomy apartment.

A dilapidated, small-sized looking-glass adorned the partition wall back of the bar. In the tool-room were a hatchet and a butcher's knife, besides a bunch of rusty keys.

Suspended from the bar-room wall and right over the dead woman's head, was a picture of Napoleon Bonaparte surveying a battlefield with his generals. A picture of Richard Wagner looked down on the corpse from another part of the interior.

"When I first came in here this morning with the milkman," said Morgan, "there were bottles and half-filled glasses on the bar."

"What was in the glasses?" asked Stricket.

"In one there was nothing but soda-water. The other contained claret."

"How long was it after you got here before the police arrived?" asked Old Spicer.

"I had had hardly time enough to take a good look at the murdered woman when Policeman Cannon, who resides in the brick block next south of this, came in. He had only just returned from his night patrol and lain down. His wife heard the outcry in the street and aroused him."

"I suppose he assumed authority at once?"

"Why, he found the place pretty well filled by an excited throng, and men, women and boys making excursions through the several apartments; but before he could clear out the people, Detective Reilly arrived."

"Ah! somebody telephoned to headquarters, I suppose?"

"I suppose so, for very soon the coroner came rushing in, then Detective Brewer made his appearance in hot haste; and finally Chief Bollmann, Policeman Hyde and other officers."

"By that time there was a scattering, I fancy," said Stricket, with a smile.

"Yes," assented George, "everybody was hunted from the basement except those you see here now."

At this moment Coroner Mix joined them.

"Going to look into this case a little, Old Spicer?" he asked.

"I have some thoughts of doing so," was the reply.

"I hope you will," said the coroner. "If there is any information I can give you, I will impart it gladly."

"Are there any clues to work on as yet?" asked Old Spicer.

"Very few, so far as I have been able to learn."

"What do you know about the woman, anyway?"

"Very little indeed. The fact is, Spicer, there seems to be a blissful ignorance on every hand, even regarding the history of the victim and her family affairs."

"Ah-ha! she kept her family affairs to herself, did she?"

"It seems so. A mystery looms up at the very outset of the case. But of that hereafter."

"All right, the mystery can wait, if you say so. But with regard to her relatives, surely something is known about them. What have you been able to find out?"

"In the first place, I have ascertained that Mrs. Ernst had been in this country between thirty and forty years, coming from Germany; and that her financial manager, for a long time past, was Maier Zunder."

"She was a widow, I believe?"

"Yes, a good deal of a widow. She had been married three times, and her three husbands are dead."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; the first died in Germany."

"What was his name?"

"George Pfaff. After his death she came to the United States and met her second husband, Franz Natolph, in New York."

"He came to New Haven with her, didn't he?" asked Stricket.

"Yes," was the reply, "and they started in the saloon-business in this very place."

"There was a pretty serious row, wasn't there, in which Natolph got hurt?"

"Yes, one night, in this very room, Natolph was struck in the head with a bottle, nearly cracking his skull. Typhoid fever set in, and that and the injuries from the bottle soon after caused his death."

"How long is it since Ernst, her third husband, died?" asked Old Spicer.

"Less than ten years," was the reply.

"She left no children, I believe?"

"No – never had any, so far as I have been able to learn."

"She has kept up the business, married or single?"

"Yes: to the very hour of her death."

Old Spicer glanced at the dead body on the sofa.

"She was a very stout woman," he remarked, "but, I believe, was not in good health."

"No," answered the coroner, "she has been troubled of late years with a severe asthmatic attack. She was rarely seen outside of this basement, for a flight of stairs was a terror to her."

"She suffered from rheumatism, I have been told."

"Yes, fearfully; it settled in her limbs, and caused a lameness, which was relieved somewhat by the assistance of the black walking-stick you see by her side."

"But she did go out sometimes?"

"Only at rare intervals, and then always in a carriage."

"She was quite well off – rich, in fact?"

"Of late years she has been increasing her wealth pretty fast. She owns this house, and the large brick block directly back of it, which fronts on York Street."

"She was mighty close-fisted," observed Stricket.

"Yes," assented the coroner, "she was of a parsimonious disposition, and by some in this neighborhood was called very grasping and miserly."

"It seems to me the chief ought to know something about her affairs," remarked Stricket, in a musing tone; "for, if I remember rightly, he was employed by her years ago, when he was practicing law."

"You are right, Mr. Stricket," assented the coroner, "years ago he was her counsel, but only, as he informs me, on two or three occasions."

At that moment the chief and several other officials joined them. As they seemed very willing to talk, Old Spicer determined to be a listener, and very sparing of his own words.

CHAPTER III.

OLD SPICER BEGINS AN INVESTIGATION

"What do you think of the case, Spicer?" asked the chief, carelessly.

"I have formed no decided opinion as yet," was the reply, "have you?"

"Well," rejoined the chief, "I am beginning to map out a theory."

"I should like to hear it," said Spicer.

"I have no objection to giving you my ideas," returned Bollmann, "you see of late, the old woman had become more grasping than ever. She didn't care who came here so long as they left plenty of money behind them, and there's no doubt of it, the greater part of those who frequented the place were a pretty tough set."

"That's evident, I think."

"Yes, young men and young women have been frequently seen in this basement, whose hilarity was so violent at times during the night that the upper tenants were more or less disturbed. We infer, too, from what we have seen of the series of rooms we have stumbled upon, that they were not for the accommodation of the most law-abiding of our citizens."

"You think, then, this murder was committed by some of the dead woman's patrons?"

"I think that may be the case."

"And you will shape your investigation accordingly?"

"Yes; and our first move will be to find out who was here last night."

"Have you made any progress in that direction?"

"One of the tenants of the house – Otto Webber – who will remove from here in a day or two, came into the basement last night, about 8.30, to tell Mrs. Ernst he was about to vacate his apartments. He had with him Alexander Lane and Andrew Lane, brothers, who live on Congress Avenue. Andrew is to rent the tenement to be vacated by Webber. The latter introduced the widow to him. While they were talking, the sound of female voices and those of a couple of men reached them, from one of the little back rooms."

"Ah-ha! did Webber catch a glimpse of them?"

"No, he did not see any of the party; neither did his companions. But, Spicer, my men are hunting for that quartet."

"So?"

"Yes, just so."

"What else have you to go by?"

"A woman in the brick block which the widow owned, just back of this and fronting on York Street, looked from a rear window, last night, and saw a light burning here until nearly eleven o'clock."

"The quartet probably kept it up pretty late."

"Then Mrs. John Newstrum, who lives directly over this room, just told me that she heard persons down here as late as ten o'clock, and after."

"Did she hear anything like a quarrel?"

"Nobody in the house heard any quarreling or loud words during the night."

"Is it thought the murderers got away with much wealth?"

"When we searched the house, a little while ago, and talked with Mr. Zunder here, we concluded that they probably got away with between four and five hundred dollars. She was known to have about that amount by her, as she was intending to pay certain bills that were due."

"Not a very big haul, if that's all they got."

"I am confident they got no more than five hundred dollars at the most," said Mr. Zunder, emphatically.

"I'll bet they had good reasons for believing that they were going to get more," observed Detective Reilly, confidently.

"There's no doubt about that," said the chief, quickly; "they supposed the old woman kept her pile right here in this basement."

"My theory," remarked Brewer, "is that the murderer or murderers were very familiar with the premises, and that they came here with the intention of robbing the old woman of a big stake. In order to carry out their villainous work, they first bound and gagged her, and then got her onto the sofa there."

"You don't think, then, Phil, that they intended to murder her?" said Old Spicer, inquiringly.

"I do not," was the reply. "You see, after they got that gag in her mouth, they probably began to go through the several rooms, and left her tied where she is now lying. The fact that she was such a sufferer from asthma may not have been known to the criminals. With a handkerchief stuck in her mouth, and her asthmatic difficulty, you can readily see that an old woman like her could not live long."

"I believe you're right, Phil," said one of the other detectives. "I don't believe they intended to kill her."

"Have you questioned everybody in the house?" asked Old Spicer of the chief.

"Yes," was the answer, "we have had something to say to every one who lives here."

"You learned nothing more, I suppose?"

"Nothing more of any consequence."

"Have you heard what this young man has to say, chief?" asked Officer Cannon, indicating a person of about twenty-five who was standing by his side.

"No," answered the chief; "what is it?"

"Speak up for yourself, young man," said the officer, encouragingly.

The young man, thus admonished, advanced and said:

"I was returning from a whist party with a friend about one o'clock this morning. Just before we reached Spruce Street, on Oak, we heard the loud talk of three men in a buggy. They acted as if they might be partially intoxicated. The team was going as rapidly as it could. Just before they came up to where we were they spied us, and we heard one of them say, 'hush!' Not a word more came from their lips until long after they had passed us, then we could hear them talking again."

"Hum! Did they come from this way?" asked the chief.

"Yes, sir; they were not far from this house when we first saw them."

"Which way did they go after they had passed you?"

"Toward Howe Street."

"Did you notice anything in the buggy?"

"Yes, sir; we both noticed it."

"What was it?"

"An ordinary packing box."

"In front?"

"No, sir; fastened in the rear, behind the seat."

"You are sure they didn't drive out Oak Street?"

"I am not quite sure; but I think they turned into Howe."

"I have heard something of this story before," said the chief, aside to Old Spicer.

"It may be worth while looking those fellows up," returned the old detective.

"I think so."

"What was it you had heard before?"

"Why, one of the women in the house here peered from her front window down on the sidewalk, somewhere about midnight, she thinks, and saw three suspicious-looking characters talking in subdued tones, near the steps leading to the saloon below."

"Ah, I see; and joining our young friend's story of the three men dashing toward Howe Street at one o'clock, or through Oak Street, as *you* think, with the woman's story of the whispering trio on the sidewalk, you think there may be a clew that will lead to important revelations?"

"It seems so to me – Well, what is it, Woodford?"

"I've just found this handkerchief, sir," and Officer Woodford handed a very fine embroidered handkerchief to the chief.

"Where did you find it?" asked Bollmann, curiously, as he carefully examined the delicate piece of cambric.

"By the side of a chair in the next room. I fancy it may have belonged to some one who was with the murderer or murderers."

"S. S." mused the chief, as he caught sight of those initials in one corner of the handkerchief; "I'd give something handsome to know what those two letters stand for."

Old Spicer took the handkerchief from him, and after a moment's inspection, said:

"Yes, this may prove a valuable clew. It may be well to cultivate the acquaintance of S. S."

Chief Bollmann seized the cambric clew and hurried away.

The old detective turned to Maier Zunder and abruptly said:

"You have had charge of the dead woman's financial affairs for a long time, I believe, sir?"

"Yes," was the reply, "for a good many years. In fact, I have looked after her money matters and kept charge of her bank books of deposit ever since she came to this city."

"You think she did not have a very large sum by her last night?"

"I am pretty sure she did not."

"Not more than four or five hundred dollars, I think you said?"

"Last Sunday she had one hundred and fifty dollars by her. She wanted to paint her several houses, and I let her have four hundred more."

"Had she paid the painters, do you think?"

"I don't know. If she had, she must still have had some two or three hundred dollars left."

"Has any money been found here by the police?"

"Not a great deal, I believe."

"Only one dollar and seventy-five cents has been found, either on her person or about the premises," said George Morgan.

"How much had she in the banks, Mr. Zunder?"

"Her bank books show credits to the amount of \$1500, and I have them safe in my care."

"Have you any idea who the criminals may be?"

"I think I could make a pretty close guess, Mr. Spicer."

"I should like to know which way your suspicions point."

"Well, sir, it is my decided opinion that Margaret Ernst was murdered by parties in this house."

"Oh-ho! that's it, eh? Well, I think I see your line of argument, sir, and I must say you reason shrewdly."

"I am confident that when the truth is known you will find I am right."

"I shouldn't at all wonder."

"At least," added the financial manager, "you will find that some one in this house is seriously implicated, mark that, Mr. Spicer."

"I will remember what you say." Then in another tone:

"Let's see, how old was she?"

"Her age has been stated as seventy-two. I think she was nearer seventy-four or seventy-five."

"She was from Germany?"

"Yes, from Oxburg, in Bavaria."

"She had made a will?"

"Yes."

"To whom did she leave her property?"

"One half to her own relatives in the old country, and the rest to the relatives of her last husband."

"He died about ten years ago?"

"Who, John Ernst?"

"Yes."

"Nearer twelve, I should say."

"He had been in this country some time?"

"Yes; he served in the Union army through the late war."

"What was her maiden name?"

"Margaret Tepley."

"You heard what Bollmann's detectives said. Do you think as they do, that there was no intention to kill her?"

"Nonsense! She was deliberately murdered. The back of her head was pounded against the arm of that sofa, and afterward she was smothered with a pillow. No intention to kill her? Pshaw! the poor old lame woman attempted to make a fight of it. Why, sir, she called out as loud as she could. Her voice was heard distinctly by people in the house."

"So? You are quite sure of what you say?"

"Believe me. I know what I am talking about, Mr. Spicer."

"I must see some of the people of the house."

"Do so. Go into the matter thoroughly."

"I generally do, Mr. Zunder."

"I know that; hence, I have faith in you. And a word in your ear, Mr. Spicer. Your work shall be well paid for. *I* will see to that. As you can easily understand, I feel more than an ordinary interest in this case."

"I understand. And you can depend on me, and those associated with me, to do our level best to get at the exact truth in this cold-blooded and cowardly affair." And a moment later, after whispering to Stricket and George Morgan, Old Spicer left the basement.

CHAPTER IV. OLD SPICER CONTINUES HIS INVESTIGATIONS. – THE SECRET VAULT

After a word or two with Coroner Mix, who was standing in the outer hall, Old Spicer ascended to the main floor of the house, where he questioned Otto Webber and his wife, and then climbing another flight of stairs, knocked at the door of John Neustrom's apartments.

The door was opened by a young woman of perhaps twenty summers, and the caller was invited to enter.

There was another person in the room – a woman – who was seated by the window.

"Mrs. Neustrom, if I am not mistaken?" said the detective, in an inquiring tone, as his eyes rested on this lady.

"Yes; I am Mrs. Neustrom," she said.

"And this is your charming niece, Miss Minnie?"

"Yes, the girl is my niece."

"I have called, Mrs. Neustrom, to put a few questions to Miss Minnie with regard to what she saw and heard last night at, I think, somewhere between eleven and twelve o'clock;" and as he had not been asked to sit down, Old Spicer now quietly seated himself on his own accord.

"I am sorry, sir," said Mrs. Neustrom, in a tone of decision; "but it will be impossible for her to answer your questions."

"Why so?"

"She has been cautioned not to speak on the subject to any one."

"By whom has she been cautioned?"

"By two, or more, of the officers of the law."

"Which ones?"

"Well, the chief, for one."

"And who else?"

"A detective."

"I suppose you know something of the law governing such cases, Mrs. Neustrom?"

"I know very little about the matter, sir."

"I am sorry to hear that."

"If Mr. Neustrom were home, he might know. He's pretty well posted."

"Then he's not in the house at present?"

"No, sir; he went out a little while ago with one of the detectives."

"That's very unfortunate. But as it happens, I also am pretty well posted in the law."

"You are?"

"Yes, ma'am, and I assure you, in such cases, the law places unlimited authority in the hands of the coroner."

"It does?"

"Yes, ma'am, and he has ordered me to get Miss Minnie's testimony. I have also the authority of the late Mrs. Ernst's executor to back me. In short, I am employed by these two gentlemen."

"And who may you be, sir?"

"My name is Spicer – Mark Spicer," answered the detective with a polite bow. "It's just possible you may have heard of me before."

"Oh!" exclaimed Minnie Neustrom, eagerly. "Old Spicer! Of course, auntie, I shall tell him everything."

"Why, certainly, my dear," answered her aunt, "especially as it's the law."

Old Spicer smiled quietly, and turning to the young lady, said:

"You saw three strange men hovering round the premises until nearly midnight, I believe?"

"Two, not three, sir," answered Minnie.

"Only two? I understood you said three."

"No, sir; there were only two."

"What first attracted your attention to them, Miss Neustrom?"

"Their loud talking, sir."

"Loud talking, eh? Where were they when you first heard them?"

"In Mrs. Ernst's kitchen, I think."

"How did it happen that you were up so late last night?"

"I had been down-town, and did not reach home until after half-past ten o'clock."

"And you did not go to bed at once when you did reach home?"

"No, sir. Before I retired, auntie, here, asked me to lock the woodshed door."

"Where is your woodshed?"

"In the yard, in the rear of the house; and in order to reach it I was obliged to go down two flights of stairs. You may think it strange, sir, but even while I was obeying the instructions of my aunt a horrible dread that something awful was soon to occur came over me, and my trip to the woodshed was made literally in fear and trembling."

"Then, I take it, you were not long in accomplishing your purpose?"

"No, indeed, it took but a second to bolt the woodshed door, and an additional minute or two for me to retrace my steps."

"And then you went to your window?"

"Yes, sir; for, you see, from the window of my room, a person can look down on the rear apartment windows of the basement. I raised the window, but could not hear the words used in the basement below, although the parties there seemed to be still quarreling with their tongues."

"Were they Germans?" asked Old Spicer.

"No, sir; I am quite positive they were not."

"What makes you so sure about it?"

"Because the indistinct utterances I overheard did not sound at all like those coming from a Teutonic tongue."

"You caught sight of these parties at last, did you not?"

"Yes, sir; just before I went to bed I saw from my window the forms of two men issuing from the basement and prowling in the yard."

"Would you know those men again?"

"Good gracious! no, sir."

"Why not?"

"A heavy fog had settled in the neighborhood, making it impossible for me to obtain a clear view of them, or, indeed, of any objects forty feet away."

"When you found you couldn't make out who they were, what did you do?"

"I went to bed."

"A very wise proceeding, I must confess." Then abruptly:

"Miss Neustrom, I would like to see you alone for a few minutes."

The girl started and looked at her aunt.

That good woman seemed bewildered, and didn't know what to say.

"I shall not detain you for more than a few minutes," said the detective in a reassuring tone.

"This room will do," and he pointed to what might have been the dining-room.

"Come, then," said Minnie, and, opening the door, she led the way into the next apartment.

They remained together for more than a quarter of an hour, and then Old Spicer took his leave.

Where he spent the rest of the day is not positively known; but that night, at nine o'clock, he sat in his own back parlor, calmly waiting the coming of Seth Stricket and George Morgan.

At length, within a few minutes of each other, they both arrived, and as soon as they were seated, Old Spicer impatiently asked:

"Well, what have you to tell me? I suppose you have found out something of importance?"

"Who shall speak first?" asked George, with a smile.

"Let's hear from you," said the old detective.

"Very well," was the reply. "The first thing of importance I have to mention is the traces of footprints I found in the yard just north of the Ernst homestead."

"Ah! footprints, eh? Were they plain – distinct?"

"Some of them were quite so. You see, the parties, whoever they were, that went through this yard, walked over ground that has been recently planted with vegetables, and the tracks of their boots or shoes are still discernible."

"But have you any good reason for supposing these tracks were made by the parties we are looking for?"

"It is quite evident, from the direction they take, that those who made them came from the Ernst back yard, and proceeded to the fence on the north boundary-line of the property next beyond. There are also what I regard as unmistakable signs on the high board fence where some one tried to climb that fence very recently."

"You measured the footprints?"

"Yes, sir."

"Could you get casts of them?"

"I managed to get two or three, but none that are quite perfect."

"That's all well enough, George," said Old Spicer, after a moment's reflection; "and yet what I can't quite understand is why the murderers should have taken the trouble to climb that fence and go across that yard, when it would have been much more convenient for them to have walked right out the front door of the barroom, for no one, so far as I can learn, was on the street at that hour. Then, too, such a course would have taken them clear of high fences, back yards, and a possible watch-dog."

"I can't explain the matter," smiled George; "but there are the marks on the fence, and there are the footprints."

"Well, they shall have due consideration, of course. And now what next?"

"The next piece of information I have to offer is – there's a woman in the case!"

"So? Well, there generally is. What evidence have you got on this point?"

"You know how many handkerchiefs were used in binding the poor old woman's limbs and in gagging her?"

"Yes, five, at least, I should say."

"And then, you remember, Woodford found another?"

"Yes, marked 'S. S.'"

"And now I have found still another, which is certainly the property of a woman."

"Is there any mark upon it?"

"Yes. I have found the initials 'E. B.,' or 'C. B.,' in one corner, and there yet lingers in it the scent of a cheap perfume."

"Let me see the handkerchief."

Morgan took it from his pocket and handed it to Old Spicer.

He carefully examined the two letters in the corner.

"It's hard to say whether they are 'E. B.' or 'C. B.,'" he said at last; "but I am inclined to think the latter."

Then he put the handkerchief to his nose.

"Hum. Cheap perfume, eh?" he said.

"Yes; can't you detect it?" asked George.

"I certainly detect an odor – a peculiar odor; but *I* don't call it perfume."

"What do you call it, then?"

"If I were to give it a name, I should call it – "

"Well, what?"

"Chloroform."

"Chloroform!"

"Certainly."

"By Jove! I believe you're right."

"I know I am right. Where did you find this handkerchief?"

"Just behind the head of the sofa, where it had fallen; and why some one hadn't found it before is more than I can understand."

"I suppose because they didn't like to disturb the resting-place of the body."

"That must be it; for I had to move the sofa out a little to get at it."

"And you think, from the fact of having found this handkerchief, that there was a woman with the murderers?"

"I think there may have been. The male portion of humanity, as a general thing, do not go to the extremity of initialing their pocket-handkerchiefs, and few men carry a piece of cambric so fine as this. Then, too, ordinarily, a man is not armed with more than one handkerchief at a time – especially those of the class of citizens that made the Ernst saloon their headquarters. So, speculating on such a basis and also on the fact that all of the seven handkerchiefs might reasonably be called those of females, I think there is little doubt but one woman at least, assisted materially in this murderous work."

"I am inclined to agree with you, George. By the way, did you manage to learn anything more about that trap-door and secret tunnel?"

"Very little. As you didn't want me to explore it when any of the regular force were about, I was obliged to confine myself to questioning such of the widow's patrons and neighbors as I thought might have some information on the subject to impart."

"Well, you found out something from them?"

"Yes, one fellow had a somewhat romantic story to tell. Years ago, he said, when the Sunday liquor-law was so strictly enforced in this city, Mrs. Ernst and her second husband, who was then living, built an immense underground vault in the back-yard, at some distance from the house, and that trap-door opens into a tunnel leading to this vault, which, by the way, is capable of accommodating quite a number of persons.

"The thing was a grand success. There were, of course, strong suspicions that the woman and her last two husbands were violating the law by selling liquor and beer on Sunday, but no evidence of a positive character could be obtained, and the reason was that this great underground chamber was so secluded and so vigilantly guarded that the entrance to it was known to only the best and most reliable customers.

"The thirsty, on a Sunday afternoon or evening, were seen to enter the basement, but all traces of them thereafter for hours were lost. A close watch, and even a personal inspection of the premises, were unavailing, inasmuch as the patrons could not be seen anywhere. They were secreted in the underground vault, indulging in all the liquid nourishment they wanted, while the searchers were vainly peering into this room and that of the basement. A cart-load of ashes, you remember, now partially fills up the entrance to the vault."

"Yes, I remember the ashes, and I have no doubt there is exactly such a vault as your informant describes, and that it was used for the purpose he names; but I am inclined to believe it has been used for other purposes since. Of that, however, hereafter. What more have you to tell me, George?"

"I understand that quite a number of the tenants over there are going to move within the next few days."

"Is that so? Did you learn which ones?"

"No; but the Neustrom family are among them."

"Ah, indeed! Well, on the whole, I am not surprised to hear it," and the old detective became very thoughtful.

CHAPTER V. SETH STRICKET MAKES HIS REPORT

At length, rousing himself, Old Spicer turned to Stricket, and said:

"Well, Seth, I suppose you have something interesting to tell us?"

"I have managed to pick up a little information," was the modest reply.

"Very good; let's have it."

"George has been talking about the seven handkerchiefs. He has told you that some, if not all of them, belong to women. I can tell you what woman one of them, at least, belongs to."

"The deuce you can! Who is she?"

"Mrs. Otto Webber."

"What! the wife of the cigar-maker who lives directly over the barroom?"

"The same."

"You are sure you are right?"

"I have positively identified one of the handkerchiefs as belonging to her. And more than that, I have discovered parties who are ready to swear that they have seen the cloth found about Mrs. Ernst's head in the possession of the Webbers within the past forty-eight hours."

"You are getting on fast, Seth."

"I am not through yet."

"Well, what next?"

"Stairs, you know, lead directly from the apartments occupied by Mrs. Ernst to those occupied by the Webbers."

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, Monday night Mr. Webber called on the murdered woman and informed her that he was going to leave her house, but had found another tenant for her."

"I know he did."

"He admits now that he stayed in the saloon for some time, and drank liquor with the old lady; but he claims that she was in the best of spirits when he left her, which, he says, was before ten o'clock."

"Does Bollmann, or any of the regular force suspect Webber?"

"Yes."

"Have they let him find it out?"

"Yes."

"Thunder! how far have they gone in the matter?"

"Both Webber and his wife were brought to the police office by Detective Brewer early this evening."

"Do you know what followed?"

"Chief Bollmann, Coroner Mix, and the detectives questioned Webber for over an hour, and then subjected Mrs. Weber to a similar examination."

"Hum! What did it all amount to?"

"Not much. One of the officials informed me that when Webber was brought to the police office the expectation was that he would not be allowed to depart again until a jury had pronounced him guilty or not guilty of the crime of murder; but after the rigid examination was over, the coroner decided that it would not be best to place him under arrest at present."

"Webber was allowed to go home, then?"

"Yes; but policemen were detailed to watch his house all night."

"Do the authorities know all that you know?"

"No. I thought it wasn't best to give anything away just yet."

"Right; but I hope you also established a watch on his movements?"

"You may be sure I have the right man looking after him. And he isn't the only one I am having shadowed either."

"Is that so? Who is the other party?"

"August Strouse, a German Anarchist, who, until last week lived in the house occupied by the murdered woman."

"And you have good reasons for suspecting this fellow, you think?"

"Yes. I think so. You see, Strouse did not pay the rent of the rooms he occupied, and was told to move by Mrs. Ernst. He moved, but swore he would make trouble for the old woman before he was many weeks older."

"Is he a single man?"

"No, he has a wife and two children, but is considered a pretty tough character."

"Has he a police record?"

"Yes; a few months ago he was arrested for theft and was found guilty. I have no doubt that a more careful search would show that he has been up for other crimes."

"What put you on his track?"

"I came across a reliable party who, after giving me other valuable information, told me that he saw Strouse enter Mrs. Ernst's apartments shortly before nine o'clock last night. He further said that Strouse entered the basement by way of one of the rear doors – sneaked in, as it were – and probably hid himself in the old woman's bedroom."

"Have you seen this fellow yourself?"

"Yes, I started out after him, and after a long search, found him in Fred Siebold's saloon on State Street."

"How did he act?"

"He seemed to have plenty of money and was slightly under the influence of liquor."

"Did you speak with him?"

"Yes, I questioned him a little, in a careless sort of way."

"What did he have to say for himself?"

"He denied that he was in Mrs. Ernst's place last night, and said he had not been there since last week when he moved."

"He said that, did he?"

"He did."

"And the man who claims to have seen him enter one of her back doors is perfectly reliable, is he?"

"He is; I'll vouch for him myself."

"It looks bad for Mr. Strouse then, it seems to me."

"That's the way I look at it. Indeed, I am confident that he knows something about the murder."

"You are having him shadowed, you say?"

"Yes, Ned Nugent, properly disguised, is on his track."

"Don't let him lose sight of him. This worthy anarchist may lead us to something."

"I've no doubt he will; and he may lead us to a point that will surprise you."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Simply this: Not long ago Mrs. Ernst was visited by her brother, August Tepley, of Oxburg, Bavaria. Of course he was hard up and looking out for number one, otherwise he wouldn't have come. By keeping at her, he at last succeeded in inducing his sister to loan him three hundred dollars, and he obtained a good knowledge of her financial affairs."

"It was commonly reported that Mrs. Ernst was worth at least \$50,000, and that most of her money was kept hidden about her apartments. Her brother believed this. He knew exactly how she

had left her property, and he tried to induce her to change her will in his favor. She did not do so, though I think in time she might.

"But the man was greedy and anxious. As I have just said, he believed the greater part of that \$50,000 was in the house. August Strouse was also in the house. Naturally these two met."

"It is *said* that August Tepley went back to Bavaria, but I have had it hinted to me that he was seen only a few days ago in New York, and, indeed, even nearer than that.

"The other August, the anarchist, went down the road a few evenings since. You can put this and that together as well as I can."

Stricket ceased to speak, and there was profound silence in the little back parlor for some minutes.

At length George Morgan exclaimed:

"Thunder! gentlemen, this case begins to wear a mighty ugly look."

"There does appear to be something pretty black about it," mused Old Spicer, "yes, there does, for a fact." Then abruptly:

"What are you going to do for the next hour or so, Seth?"

"Get a little rest, if the thing is possible."

"By all means, my dear fellow. And you, George?"

"Can I be of any service to you, sir?" asked George, quickly.

"It is quite possible you can."

"Then I am going with you."

"All right. Seth, you lie down on this lounge. George and I will be gone about two hours. After that we will see what it is best to do."

"Very well, sir," and throwing himself upon the lounge, in less than a minute Seth Stricket was fast asleep.

A moment later Old Spicer and George Morgan left the house, and hurried out of Home Place.

CHAPTER VI. HORRIFIED WATCHERS – IN THE TUNNELS AND VAULT

"Where are we going, sir, if it's a fair question?" asked George, as they hastened up Court Street.

"To the Ernst House," was the brief reply.

"You expect to find out something there?"

"Yes, I expect to find out something about August Strouse, and I expect to learn something about that tunnel and vault from personal observation."

"Ah! you are going into it to-night, then?"

"Yes."

"But Bollmann's men are in the house."

"We must manage to hoodwink them."

"I don't see how it can be done."

"Nor do I; but we shall find a way."

At length they arrived in York Street.

"Now, then," said Old Spicer, "you have been over this ground."

"Yes," was the answer, "I think I know it pretty well."

"Then conduct me through the passage into the backyard of the Ernst House."

"This way, sir," and George led him through a narrow passage at the end of the brick block.

Presently they found themselves in the yard back of the basement saloon.

Old Spicer tried one of the basement doors.

It was locked.

He tried the next.

It yielded, and he entered, closely followed by George.

He led the way toward the room in which the trap door was situated. But in passing the bar-room, he saw, through the open door, three men grouped together in chairs, while a coffin, containing all that was mortal of Margaret Ernst, occupied the center of the apartment.

The darkness of the place was only dissipated in a small degree by an oil lamp, which burned dimly on the bar.

"Who are they?" asked Old Spicer, with his lips close to Morgan's ear.

"One's Cohen," was the answer; "another is –"

"Webber, isn't it?"

"By Jove! I believe it is."

"And who is the third?"

"I don't know; I can't see his face."

"Well, hark, then; let's hear what they have to say."

"Yes," the unknown was saying at this point, "it was the worst experience I ever had. I never want to be frightened so badly as that again."

"Tell us all about it, old fellow," urged Cohen.

"Well, you see, we had got the body in the way I hinted a moment ago; and in order not to attract too much attention, we laid it over on the back seat of the carriage, and my friend Jim and I took the front seat and drove off.

"By and by we came to a lonely road, leading through a piece of woods. As we entered the woods I thought I heard a slight sound just back of me, as of some one moving.

"Jim heard it too, and we looked back simultaneously.

"One glance was enough; then we gave a yell of horror and sprung from the carriage, Jim on his side and I on mine; and the way we legged it for the open country was a caution."

"Why," exclaimed Webber, "what the deuce was it that frightened you so?"

"Yes," added Cohen, "what did you see when you looked back?"

"See? We saw that confounded corpse sitting bolt upright on the rear seat, like any live man. And at the very moment our eyes rested upon him, he started forward, placing one hand on the front seat by my side, and the other on Jim's back, while his great wide-open eyes stared fixedly into mine."

"Good Lord! I should have thought you would have been frightened," exclaimed Webber.

"How did it all turn out?" asked Cohen.

"Why, this way," was the reply. "After running some distance, we stopped to consult. While we stood there, a man with a heavily-loaded wagon drove up and asked us what we were doing on such a lonely road at that time of night.

"I told him we were taking a dead body to the city for Dr. White, and that it had suddenly started up and driven us from our carriage.

"He said he couldn't swallow that story. We swore it was true. Then he asked where we had left the carriage. We told him about half a mile ahead. 'Come on and show me, then,' he said. 'I have a rifle and two revolvers here; I guess with those we are enough for one dead man, at least;' so we went forward with him.

"At length we came to our carriage; the horse had merely gone to one side of the road, and was quietly cropping the grass.

"The man took a lantern from his wagon, lighted it, and approached the carriage. Then we heard him laugh.

"'Come here,' he cried, 'and see what started your corpse to life.'

"We hastened forward, and saw at once that the dead man had not altered his position since we had so abruptly left him.

"Our new friend then pointed out to us how the wind had carried the ends of the loose robe in which the corpse was dressed on to the wheels. The motion of the wheels had then pulled the robe so that the corpse which it enveloped was raised to a sitting position, and at last drawn forward in the way I have described."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.