

An Exciting Christmas Eve

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AN EXCITING CHRISTMAS EVE;

OR, MY LECTURE ON DYNAMITE.

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Author of "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes," etc.

CHAPTER I.

IT has often occurred to me to be a very strange and curious thing that danger and trouble should follow those who are

most anxious to lead a quiet and uneventful life. I myself have been such a one, and I find on looking back that it was in those very periods of my existence which might have been most confidently reckoned

on as peaceful that some unexpected adventures has befallen me, like the thunder-bolt from an unclouded sky which shook the streets of old Rome. Possibly my experience differs from that of other men,



"Then shove him in."—See chap. 8.

(Drawn by H. CASSIDY WOODVILLE.)

AN EXCITING CHRISTMAS EVE

It has often seemed to me to be a very strange and curious thing that danger and trouble should follow those who are most anxious to lead a quiet and uneventful life. I myself have been such a one, and I find on looking back that it was in those very periods of my existence which might have been most confidently reckoned on as peaceful that some unexpected adventure has befallen me, like the thunder-bolt from an unclouded sky which shook the nerves of old Horace. Possibly my experience differs from that of other men, and I may have been especially unfortunate.

If so, there is the more reason why I should mourn over my exceptional lot, and record it for the benefit of those more happily circumstanced.

Just compare my life with that of Leopold Walderich, and you will see what I complain of. We both come from Mulhausen, in Baden, and that is why I single him out as an example, though many others would do as well. He was a man who professed to be fond of adventure.

Now listen to what occurred. We went to Heidelberg University together. I was quiet, studious, and unassuming; he was impetuous, reckless, and idle. For three years he reveled in every sort of riot, while I frequented the laboratories, and rarely deserted my books save for a hurried walk into the country when a pain in my head and ringing in my ears warned me that I was trifling with my constitution.

Yet during that period his life was comparatively uneventful, while my whole existence was a series of hairbreadth perils and escapes. I damaged my eyesight and nearly choked myself by the evolution of a poisonous gas.

I swallowed a trichina in my ham, and was prostrated for weeks. I was hurled out of a second floor window by an English lunatic because I ventured to quote the solemn and serious passage in Schoppheim's Weltgeschichte which proves Waterloo to have been a purely Prussian victory, and throws grave doubts on the presence of any British force nearer than

Brussels! Twice I was nearly drowned, and once I should have been precipitated from the parapet of the schloss but for the assistance of this same Englishman.

These are a few of the incidents which occurred to me while endeavouring to read in seclusion for my degree.

Even in smaller matters this luck of mine held good. I can well remember, for example, that on one occasion the wilder spirits of the Badischer Corps ventured upon an unusually hare-brained escapade.

There was a farmer about a couple of miles from the town whose name was Nicholas Bodeck. This man had made himself obnoxious to the students, and they determined to play a prank upon him in return. An enormous number of little caps were accordingly made with the colours of the corps upon them, and the conspirators invaded his premises in the middle of the night and gummed them upon the heads of all the fowls.

They certainly had a very comical effect, as I had an opportunity of judging, for I happened to pass that way in the morning. I supposed that Walderich and his friends carried out their little joke for excitement, knowing the farmer to be a resolute man.

They got no excitement from it, however; it was I who got that. Activity was never my strong point, but certainly I ran those two miles that morning with incredible speed—and so did the five men with pitch-forks who ran behind me!

These things may seem trivial, but, as you say in England, a straw shows which way the wind blows, and these were only indications of what was to come.

I took my degree in medicine, and found myself Herr Doctor Otto von Spee. I then graduated in science, receiving much applause for my thesis,

"On the Explosive Compounds of the Trimethyl Series". I was quoted as an authority in works of science, and my professors prophesied that a great career lay before me. My studies, however, were suddenly put an end to by the outbreak of the great war with France.

Waldenich volunteered into one of the crack regiments, fought in nearly every engagement, covered himself with glory, and came back unhurt to be decorated with the cross for valour.

I was stationed in an ambulance which never even crossed the frontier, yet I succeeded in breaking my arm by tumbling over a stretcher, and in contracting erysipelas from one of the few wounds which came under my care. I got no medal or cross, and went back quietly to Berlin after it was all over, and there I settled as privat docent of chemistry and physics.

You will naturally ask what all this has to do with my Christmas story. You shall see in time that it is necessary I should tell you this, in order that you may appreciate that crowning event in my long list of misfortunes.

You must remember also that I am a German and therefore somewhat long-winded perhaps, as my nation has the reputation of being.

I have often admired the dashing, rattling manner of English story-tellers, but I fear if I were to attempt to imitate this it would be as if one of our own ponderous old Mulhausen storks were to adopt the pretty graceful airs of your Christmas robins. You shall hear in time all that I have to say about my Christmas Eve.

After I had settled in Berlin I endeavoured to combine the private practice of medicine with my labours as a privat docent, which corresponds to what you call a "coach" in England.

For some years I pursued this plan, but I found that my practice, being largely among the lower classes, favoured my unfortunate propensity for getting into trouble, and I determined to abandon it.

I took a secluded house, therefore, in a quiet quarter of the city, and there I gave myself up to scientific research, pursuing principally the same train of investigation which had originally attracted me—namely, the chemistry of explosive compounds.

My expenses were small, and all the money which I could spare was laid out on scientific instruments and mechanical contrivances of different sorts. Soon I had a

snug little laboratory which, if not as pretentious as that at Heidelberg, was quite as well fitted to supply my wants.

It is true that the neighbours grumbled, and that Gretchen, my housekeeper, had to be quieted with a five-mark piece, after having been blown up three separate times, and blown down once while engaged in fixing an electric wire upon the summit of an outhouse.

These little matters, however, were easily settled, and I found my life rapidly assuming a peaceful complexion, of which I had long despaired.

I was happy—and what is more I was becoming famous. My "Remarks on Cacodyl" in the "Monthly Archives of Science" created no small sensation, and Herr Raubenthal of Bonn characterised them as, "meisterlich," though dissenting from many of my deductions.

I was enabled, however, in a later contribution to the same journal to recount certain experiments which were sufficient to convince that eminent savant that my view of the matter was the correct one.

After this victory I was universally recognised as an authority in my own special branch, and as one of the foremost living workers at explosives.

The Government appointed me to the torpedo commission at Kiel, and many other honours were bestowed upon me. One of the consequences of this sudden accession of celebrity was that I found myself in great request as a lecturer, both at scientific gatherings and at those meetings for the education of the people which have become so common in the metropolis.

By these means my name got into the daily papers as one learned in such matters, and to this it is that I ascribe the events which I am about to narrate.

It was a raw windy Christmas Eve. The sleet pattered against the window panes, and the blast howled among the skeleton branches of the gaunt poplar-trees in my garden.

There were few people in the street, and those few had their coats buttoned up, and their chins upon their breasts, and hurried rapidly homewards, staggering along against the force of

the storm. Even the big policeman outside had ceased to clank up and down, and was crouching in a doorway for protection.

Many a lonely man might have felt uncomfortable upon such a night, but I was too interested in my work to have time for any sympathy with the state of the weather.

A submarine mine was engaging my attention, and in a leaden tank in front of me I had stuck a small pellet of my new explosive. The problem was how far its destructive capacities would be modified by the action of the water.

The matter was too important to allow me to feel despondent. Besides, one of Gretchen's lovers was in the kitchen, and his gruff expressions of satisfaction, whether with her charms or my beer, or both, were sufficiently audible to banish any suspicion of loneliness.

I was raising my battery on to the table, and was connecting the wires carefully so as to explode the charge, when I heard a short, quick step outside the window, and immediately afterwards a loud knock at the outer door.

Now I very seldom had a call from any of my limited number of acquaintances, and certainly never upon such a night as this.

I was astonished for a moment; then concluding that it was a visitor of Gretchen's, I continued to work at my apparatus.

To my very great surprise, after Gretchen had opened the door there was some muttering in the hall, and then a quiet tap at the entrance of my sanctum, followed by the appearance of a tall lady whom I could vow that I had never seen in my life before.

Her face was covered by a thick dark veil, and her dress was of the same sombre colour, so that I concluded her to be a widow.

She walked in with a decisive energetic step, and after glancing round, seated herself quietly upon the sofa between the voltaic pile and my stand of reagents—all this without saying a word, or apparently taking the slightest notice of my presence.

"Good evening, madam," I remarked, when I had somehow recovered my composure.

"Would you do me a favour, doctor?" she replied, brusquely, in a harsh voice, which harmonised with her gaunt angular figure.

"Surely, madam," I answered, in my most elegant manner. I remember a girl at Heidelberg used to say that I had a very fascinating way sometimes. Of course it was only a joke, but still something must have put it into her head or she would never have said it. "What can I do for you?" I asked.

"You can send away that servant of yours, who is listening at the door."

At this moment, before I could move hand or foot, there were a succession of tremendous bumps, followed by a terrible crash and a prolonged scream. It was evident that my unhappy domestic had fallen downstairs in her attempt to avoid detection. I was about to rise, but the stranger arrested me.

"Never mind now," she said. "We can proceed to business."

I bowed my head to show that I was all attention.

The fact is, doctor," she continued, "that I wish you to come back with me and give me your opinion upon a case."

"My dear madam," I answered, "I have long retired from the practice of my profession. If you go down the street, however, you will see the surgery of Doctor Bengel, who is a most competent man, and who will be happy to accompany you."

"No, no," cried my companion, in great distress. "You or no one! You or no one! My poor dear husband cried out as I left him that Otto von Spee was the only man who could bring him back from the tomb. They will all be broken-hearted if I return without you. Besides, the professors at the hospital said that you were the only one in Europe who would be capable of dealing with it."

Now, devoted as I was to scientific research, I had always had a conviction in my mind that I had the makings in me of a first-class practical physician.

It was inexpressibly consoling to hear that the heads of the profession had endorsed this opinion by referring a curious case to my judgment. The more I thought of it, however,

the more extraordinary did it seem. "Are you sure?" I asked.

"Oh yes, quite sure."

"But I am a specialist—a student of explosives. I have had very little experience in practice. What is the matter with your husband?"

"He has a tumour."

"A tumour? I know nothing of tumours."

"Oh come, dear Doctor von Spee; come and look at it!" implored the female, producing a handkerchief from her pocket and beginning to sob convulsively.

It was too much. I had lived a secluded life, and had never before seen a female in distress.

"Madam," I said, "I shall be happy to accompany you."

I regretted that promise the moment it was uttered. There was a wild howl of wind in the chimney which reminded me of the inclemency of the night.

However, my word was pledged, and there was no possibility of escape. I left the room with as cheerful an aspect as possible, while Gretchen wrapped a shawl round my neck and muffled me up to the best of her ability.

What could there be about this tumour, I wondered, which had induced the learned surgeons to refer it to my judgment—I who was rather an artillerist than a physician?

Could it be that the growth was of such stony hardness that no knife could remove it, and that explosives were necessary for extraction? The idea was so comical that I could scarce refrain from laughing.

"Now, madam," I said re-entering the study, "I am at your disposal." As I spoke I knocked against the electric machine, causing a slight transmission of the current along the wires, so that the submarine mine exploded with a crash, blowing a little column of water into the air. Accustomed as I was to such accidents, I confess that I was considerably startled by the suddenness of the occurrence. My companion, however, sat perfectly impassive upon the sofa, and then rose without the slightest sign of surprise or emotion, and walked out of the room.

"She has the nerves of a grenadier," I mentally ejaculated, as I followed her into the street.

"Is it far?" I asked, as we started off through the storm.

"Not very far," she answered; "and I took the liberty of bringing a cab for you, for fear Herr Doctor might catch cold. Ah, here it comes."

As she spoke, a closed carriage dashed along the road, and pulled up beside us.

"Have you got Otto von Spee?" asked a sallow-faced man, letting down the window and protruding his head.

"Yes, here he is."

"Then shove him in."

For the moment I was inclined to regard the expression as a playful figure of speech, but my companion soon dispelled the delusion by seizing me by the collar and hurling me, with what seemed superhuman strength, into the vehicle.

I fell upon the floor, and was dragged on to a seat by the man, while the other sprang in, slammed the door, and the horses dashed off at a furious gallop.

I lay back in a state of bewilderment, hardly able to realise what had occurred. It was pitch dark inside the carriage, but I could hear my two companions conversing in low whispers.

Once I attempted to expostulate and demand an explanation of their conduct, but a threatening growl, and a rough hand placed over my mouth, warned me to be silent. I was neither a wealthy man nor particularly well connected, nor was I a politician.

What then, could be the object of these people in kidnapping me in such an elaborate fashion? The more I pondered over it, the more mysterious did it seem.

Once we halted for a moment, and a third man got into the carriage, who also inquired anxiously whether Otto von Spee had been secured, and expressed his satisfaction on being answered in the affirmative.

After this stoppage we rattled along even more quickly than before, the vehicle rocking from side to side with the velocity, and the clatter of the horses hoofs sounding above

the howling of the gale. It seemed to me that we must have passed through every street in Berlin before, with a sudden jar, the coachman pulled up, and my captors intimated that I was to descend.

I had hardly time to look about me and realise the fact that I was in a narrow street in some low quarter of the city. A door opened in front of us, and the two men led me through it, while the herculean female followed us, effectually cutting off any hopes of escape.

We were in a long passage or corridor, feebly illuminated by a couple of flickering lamps, whose yellow glare seemed to intensify the darkness around them.

After walking about twenty metres or more we came to a massive door, blocking our passage. One of my guardians struck it a blow with a stick which he carried in his hand, when it reverberated with a metallic clang, and swung open, closing with a snap behind us.

At this point I ventured to stop and expostulate with my companions once again. My only answer, however, was a shove from the individual behind me, which shot me through a half-opened door into a comfortable little chamber beyond.

My captors followed in a more leisurely manner, and after turning the lock, they proceeded to seat themselves, motioning to me that I should do the same.

The room in which I found myself was small, but elegantly furnished. A fire was sparkling in the grate, and the bright colours of the handsome suite of furniture and variegated carpet helped to give it a cheering aspect. The pictures on the walls, however, went far towards neutralising this effect.

They were very numerous, but every one of them treated of some unpleasant or murderous passage of history. Many of them were so distant that I was unable to decipher the inscriptions. To a scholar like myself, however, the majority were able to tell their own story.

There was the lunatic Schtaps in the garden, making his attempt upon the life of the First Napoleon. Above it was a sketch of Orsini with his cowardly bomb, waiting silently among

the loungers at the opera. A statuette of Ravallac was placed upon a pedestal in the corner, while a large oil-painting of the strangling of the unhappy Emperor Paul in his bedchamber occupied the whole of one wall of the apartment.

These things did not tend to raise my spirits, and the appearance of my three companions was still less calculated to do so.

I had several times doubted the sex of the individual who had seduced me from my comfortable home, but the veil had now been removed and revealed a dark moustache and sunburnt countenance, with a pair of searching, sinister eyes, which seemed to look into my very soul.

Of the others, one was gaunt and cadaverous, the other insignificant-looking, with a straggling beard and unhealthy complexion.

"We are very sorry, Doctor von Spee, to be reduced to this necessity," said the last-mentioned individual, "but unhappily we had no other method of securing the pleasure of your society."

I bowed—a little sulkily, I am afraid.

"I must apologise for any little liberties I have taken, above all for having deprived you of the satisfaction of beholding my husbands remarkable tumour," said my original acquaintance.

I thought of the manner in which he had bundled me about like an empty portmanteau, and my bow was even more sulky than before.

"I trust, gentlemen," I remarked, "that since your practical joke has been so admirably carried out, you will now permit me to return to the studies which you have interrupted."

"Not so fast, Herr Doctor—not so fast," said the tall man, rising to his feet. "We have a little duty which you shall perform before you leave us. It is nothing more nor less than to give a few inquirers into the truth a lesson upon your own special subject. Might I beg you to step in this direction?"

He walked over to a side door, painted of the same colour as the paper on the wall, and held it persuasively open.

Resistance was useless, as the other confederates had also risen, and were standing

on either side of me. I yielded to circumstances, and walked out as directed.

We passed down a second passage, rather shorter than the first, and much more brilliantly illuminated.

At the end of it a heavy velvet curtain was hung, which covered a green baize folding-door. This was swung open, and I found myself, to my astonishment, in a large room in which a considerable number of people were assembled. They were arranged in long rows, and sat so as to face a raised platform at one end of the apartment, on which was a single chair, with a small round table, littered with a number of objects.

My companions ushered me in, and our entrance was greeted with considerable applause.

It was clear that we had been awaited, for there was a general movement of expectation throughout the assembly. Glancing round, I could see that the majority of the company were dressed as artisans or labourers.

There were some, however, who were respectably and even fashionably attired, and a few whose blue coats and gilt shoulder-bands proclaimed them to be officers in the army.

Their nationalities seemed almost as varied as their occupations. I could distinguish the dolichocephalic head of the Teuton, the round, curl-covered cranium of the Celt, and the prognathous jaw and savage features of the Slav.

I could almost have imagined myself looking into one of the cabinets of casts in my friend Landerstein's anthropological museum.

However, I had not much time for wonder or reflection. One of my guardians led me across the room, and I found myself standing at the table, which I have already mentioned as being situated upon a raised dais. My appearance in this situation was the signal for a fresh outburst of applause, which, with clapping of hands and drumming of sticks upon the floor, lasted for some considerable time.

When it had subsided, the gaunt man who had come with me in the carriage walked up to the dais and addressed a few words to the audience.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you will perceive that the committee have succeeded in keeping their promise and of bringing the celebrated—" ("beruhmte" was the word he used)—Doctor Otto von Spee to address you." Here there was renewed applause.

"Doctor," he continued, turning to me, "I think a few words of public explanation will not be amiss in this matter. You are well known as an authority upon explosives. Now all these gentlemen and myself have an interest in this subject, and would gladly listen to your views upon it.

"We are particularly anxious that you should give us clear and precise directions as to the method of preparing dynamite, guncotton, and other such substances, as we sometimes have a little difficulty in obtaining such things for our experiments.

"You shall also tell us about the effect of temperature, water, and other agents upon these substances, the best method of storing them, and the way of using them to the greatest advantage.

"For our part, we shall listen attentively and treat you well, always provided that you make no attempt to summon aid or to escape. Should you be so ill-advised as to do either"—here he slapped his pocket—"you shall become as intimately acquainted with projectiles as you now are with explosives." I cannot say that this struck me as a good joke, but it seemed to meet considerable favour among the audience.

"I wish to add a few words to the remarks of our learned president," said a small man, rising up from among the first line of the company. "I have placed upon the table such materials as I could lay my hands upon in order that the learned doctor may be able to illustrate his discourse by any experiments which he may think appropriate. I may warn him, in conclusion, to speak somewhat slowly and distinctly, as some of his hearers are but imperfectly acquainted with the German language."

Here was my old luck again with a vengeance! At a time when Walderich and every gay dog in Berlin were snoring peacefully in their beds, I—I, Doctor Otto von Spee, the modest man of science—was lecturing to a murderous

secret organisation—for my audience could be nothing else—and teaching them to forge the weapons with which they were to attack society and everything which should be treasured and revered.

And on such a night as this too! Should I, then, put it in their power to convert a house into an arsenal, to destroy the stability of the Fatherland, and even perhaps attempt the life of my beloved kaiser? Never! I swore it—never!

Most small men who wear spectacles are obstinate. I am a small man with spectacles, and I was no exception to the rule.

I clenched my teeth, and felt that *ruat caelum*, never a word should pass my lips that might be of any help to them. I should not refuse to lecture, but I was determined to avoid those very points upon which they desired to be instructed.

I was not allowed much time for meditation. An ominous murmur among the audience, and a shuffling of feet upon the floor, betokened their impatience.

I must say, however, that many of them seemed actuated with rather kindly feelings towards me, more particularly one stoutish individual of a well-marked Celtic type, who, not content with smiling all over his florid countenance, waved his arms occasionally in motions intended to indicate sympathy and inspire confidence.

I stepped up to the table, which was covered all over with such objects as were thought to have a bearing upon my subject. Some of them were rather curious—a lump of salt, an iron teapot, part of the broken axle of a wheel, and a large pair of kitchen bellows.

Others were more appropriate. There was a piece of guncotton which could not have weighed less than a couple of pounds, coarse cotton, starch, various acids, a Bunsen burner, tubes of fulminate of mercury, some dynamite powder, and a large pitcher of water. There was also a carafe and tumbler for my own use, should I feel so disposed.

"Meine herren," I began, with perhaps a slight quaver in my voice, "we have met here tonight for the purpose of studying dynamite and other explosives." It flowed naturally from my

lips, as it was the stereotyped formula with which my discourses at the Educationische Institut were usually commenced. My audience seemed, however, to be much amused, and the florid Celt was convulsed with admiration and merriment. Even the forbidding-looking man who had been referred to as the president condescended to smile his approval and remark that I adapted myself readily to my circumstances.

"These substances," I continued, "are powerful agents either for good or for evil. For good when used for the quarrying of rocks, the removal of impediments to navigation, or the destruction of houses during a conflagration. For evil—"

"I think you had better pass on to something more practical," said the president, grimly.

"On dipping starch into certain liquids," I resumed, "it is found to assume an explosive property. The attention of a learned countryman of ours, the chemist Schonbein, was directed to the fact, and he found that by treating cotton in a similar manner the effect was enormously increased. Schonbein was a man respected among his contemporaries, devoted to his country, and loyal--"

"Pass on!" said the president.

"After being treated in this fashion," I continued, "the cotton is found to gain eighty per cent. in weight. This substance is more susceptible to an increase of temperature than gunpowder, igniting at 300° Fahrenheit, while the latter requires a heat of 560° for its explosion. Guncotton can also be exploded by a blow, which is not the case with a mixture of carbon, sulphur, and saltpetre."

Here there were some angry murmurs among the company, and the president interrupted me for the third time.

"These gentlemen complain," he said, "that you have left no definite impression upon their minds as to how the substance is manufactured. Perhaps you will kindly dwell more fully upon the point."

"I have no further remarks to make," I said.

There was another threatening murmur, and the president took something out of the pocket of his coat, and toyed with it negligently. "I think you had better reconsider your decision," he remarked.

Most little men with spectacles are timid. Again I was no exception to the rule. I am ashamed to say that the peril of my Fatherland and even of my Kaiser suddenly vanished from my recollection.

I only realised that I, Otto von Spee, was standing upon the brink of eternity. After all, I argued, they could find out for themselves in any book upon chemistry. Why should my valuable life be sacrificed for such a trifle? I resumed my lecture with somewhat undignified haste.

"Guncotton is manufactured by steeping cotton waste in nitric acid. The explosion is caused by the oxygen of the acid combining with the carbon of the wool. It should be well cleaned with water after manufacture, otherwise the superfluous nitric acid acts directly upon the wool, charring it and gradually reducing it to a gummy mass. During this process heat is often evolved sufficient to explode the cotton, so that it is a dangerous matter to neglect the cleaning. After this a little sulphuric acid may be used to get rid of the moisture, when the substance is ready for use."

There was considerable applause at this point of my discourse, several of the audience taking notes of my remarks.

While I had been speaking I had been making a careful survey of the room in the hope of seeing some possibility of escape. The dais upon which I stood extended as far as the side wall, in which there was a window.

The window was half open, and, could I reach it, there appeared to be a deserted looking garden outside, which might communicate with the street. No one could intercept me before I reached the window, but then there was the deadly weapon with which my cadaverous acquaintance was still trifling.

He was sitting on the other side, and the table would partially protect me should I venture upon a dash. Could I screw up my courage to make an attempt? Not yet, at any rate.

"General von Link," I continued, "the Austrian artillerist, is one of our leading authorities upon guncotton. He experimented upon it in field-pieces, but—"

"Never mind that," said the president.

"After being manufactured, guncotton may be compressed under water. When compressed it is perfectly safe, and cannot be discharged. This sample which we have upon the table is not compressed. No amount of heat will have any effect upon the wet cotton. In an experiment tried in England a storehouse containing guncotton was burned down without there being any explosion. If, however, a charge of fulminated mercury, or a small piece of dry cotton, be fired in connection with a damp disc, it will be sufficient to discharge it. I shall now proceed to demonstrate this to you by an experiment."

An idea had come into my mind. Upon the table there was lying a mixture of sugar and chlorate of potash, used with sulphuric acid as a fuse for mining purposes.

A bottle of the acid was also ready to my hand. I knew the white dense cloud of smoke which is raised by the imperfect combustion of these bodies. Could I make it serve as a screen between the weapon of the president and myself?

For a moment the plan seemed wild and unfeasible; still, it offered some chance of escape, and the more I thought it over the more reconciled I became to it. Of course, even after getting through the window there was the possibility that the garden might prove to be a cul-de-sac, and that my pursuers might overtake me. But then, on the other hand, I had no guarantee that I might not be murdered at the conclusion of my lecture. From what I knew of the habits of such men I considered it to be extremely probable. It was better to risk—but no, I would not think of what I was risking.

"I am now going to show you the effect of fulminate of mercury upon a small piece of damp cotton," I said, shaking out the sugar and chlorate of potash upon the edge of the table and pushing the large piece of cotton to the other end to be out of danger from the effects of the explosion.

"You will observe that the fact of the substance having been soaked with water does not in any way hinder its action." Here I poured the sulphuric acid over the mixture, dropped the bottle, and fled for the window amid a perfect cloud of smoke.

Most little men with spectacles are not remarkable for activity. Hal there at last I proved myself to be an exception. I seemed hardly to put my foot to the ground between leaving the table and shooting out through the window as the equestrians fly through hoops in the circus. I was well outside before the sharp crack which I was expecting sounded in the chamber behind me, and then--

Ah! what then? How can I ever hope to describe it? There was a low, deep rumble, which seemed to shake the ground, swelling and swelling in sound until it culminated in a roar which split the very heavens. Flames danced before my eyes, burning wood and stones and débris came clattering down around me, and as I stared about me in bewilderment I received a crushing blow upon the head, and fell.

How long I may have remained unconscious it is difficult to say. Some time, at any rate, for when I came to myself I was stretched upon the bed in my own little chamber at home, while the devoted Gretchen bathed my temples with vinegar and water. In the doorway were standing a couple of stalwart polizei diener, who bobbed their helmeted heads and grinned their satisfaction on seeing that I was returning to consciousness.

It was some while before I could recall anything of what had passed. Then gradually came the recollection of my mysterious visitor, of the wild drive through the storm, of the impromptu lecture on dynamite, and lastly of some strange and unaccountable accident. Strange it still remains, but I think that when we reflect that the table was between the bullet and me, and that on that table were two pounds of guncotton liable to ignition at a blow, we have not very far to go for an explanation. I have fired a pistol at a distance into a small piece of the same substance since that occasion with very much the same result.

And where was the house? you will ask, and what was the fate of its inmates? Ah! there my lips are sealed. The police of the Fatherland are active and cunning, and they have commanded me to say nothing—not even to my dearest friend—upon either point. No doubt they have their reasons for it, and I must obey.

Perhaps they wish other conspirators to imagine that more has been found out than is actually the case. I may say, however, that it is not conducive to long life or perfect health to be present on such an occasion. That, at least, no one can object to.

I am nearly well again now, thanks to Gretchen and Dr Benger, who lives down the road. I can hobble about, and my neighbours are already beginning to complain of the noxious vapours which I evolve.

I fear I have not quite the same enthusiasm, however, upon the subject of explosives as I entertained before my midnight lecture on dynamite. The subject seems to have lost many of its charms. It may be that in the course of time I may return to my first love once again; at present, however, I remain a quiet privat docent of the more elementary branches of chemistry.

It is that very quietness which weighs upon my mind. I fear that I am on the verge of some other unexpected adventure. There is one thing, however, upon which I am unalterably determined. Should every relative that I have in the world, with the Imperial family and half the population of Berlin, be clamouring at my door for medical advice, I shall never again protrude my head after nightfall. I am content to work away in my own little groove, and have laid aside for ever the pretensions to be looked upon as a practical physician which I entertained before that eventful Christmas Eve.