

“Just tell me he isn’t dead,” Emma Steele insisted, turning sideways on her skis.

There was an urgency in her voice as she struggled not to look at the body lying in the snow. Her husband knew what she wanted to hear. But something about the angle of the body, the twist of the head, and the blood made the truth all too clear.

“All right,” he said kindly, “he *isn’t* dead. He’s simply taking a nap. Face down in the snow. With a gun. The bullet hole is just a figment of our imagination.”

Emma Steele sighed heavily, then rested her head on the handle of her ski pole.

“You know how much I hate this murder thing,” she whined, without looking up. “Why do you insist on making it part of every vacation?”

“Me?” John Steele jumped.

“Well, it certainly isn’t *my* idea. I’d much rather collect postcards.”

“What do you think? You think I purposely asked for the ‘Murder Special’ . . . four days, three nights, two meals, and a corpse?”

It was a ridiculous conversation to be having. They were standing at the top of a magnificent ski slope in the Bavarian Alps. The view was breathtaking. A vast panorama of craggy mountains dusted with pristine snow. A sight to savor. But they couldn’t enjoy it. The dead body overwhelmed the scenery.

They had no choice but to cut their ski run short and get help. Halfway down the slope they came to a small shack with the red cross sign of the ski patrol.

“There’s someone at the top of the hill,” Emma shouted as she stopped sharply.

The spray of snow she sent up covered the two men sitting in front of the shack.

“Of course,” one of them said in a thick German accent as he brushed himself off. “The top is where everyone starts.”

“You don’t understand,” she said urgently, “this guy is dead.”

There was a moment of silence during which Emma wondered if her English was getting through.

“Dead tired,” the other one smiled.

He was proud of his command of American slang.

“Dead and gone,” John Steele corrected.

“*Kaput*,” Emma added.

The two men looked at each other stupidly for a few moments. Actually, they *did* know what she meant. The problem was that they couldn’t believe it.

“You mean to say that someone is hurt?” said the first one.

He was tall, with pale blond hair. The man for whom the name Günter was invented.

“He’s not hurt any more,” John replied. But he could quickly see that his sarcasm was lost in translation. “He’s lying on the ground. He’s not moving. Not breathing. See what I mean?”

The blond man said something in German to the other, then interpreted it for the Steeles.

“He must be knocked out,” he said, slipping smoothly into his skis.

“No,” John insisted, “I’m afraid we’re way beyond that.”

“Beyond?”

"I'm telling you this guy is *dead*," Emma said.

"What makes you say this?" the man asked.

"The gun. The blood. The bullet hole," she said plainly.

"Gun?" he winced.

"Bang! Bang!" John added, trying some sign language with his finger and thumb extended.

"I'll go and see," the man said. "Please show me where."

With powerful thrusts, he started to ski up the mountain faster than the Steeles had descended.

"Here we go again," John Steele said, making a slow herringbone pattern in the snow.

Bad Schussberg was a winter wonderland. The kind of place ski bums dream about in the heat. It was a gorgeous, elegant resort in the southeastern part of Germany known as Bavaria, nestled in the majestic Alps. Quiet and perfect. Only the richest ski mavens from all over the world knew about it. Or could afford it.

That was the reason John Steele picked it. It seemed like a place where nothing could go wrong. The perfect way to apologize to his wife for their last vacation. That one had been a disaster. John had narrowly avoided getting arrested for murdering an international spy. This time, he vowed, there would be no surprises. Just a week of skiing in the Alps, crystal snow on winding mountain trails, Bavarian hospitality, and hobnobbing with the international jet set.

By the time they settled in, Steele knew he had been right. The resort was a model of Alpine grandeur. Handsome, healthy Europeans lounged photographically on the great deck, drank warm beer by the huge fireplace, and sat at wooden tables overlooking mountain gorges as dots of bright color slid down endless ski trails in the background. It was perfect.

Until they stumbled upon *the body*.

They found it on an exquisite wilderness trail that laced the mountain just below the timber line. It was early in the morning and John and Emma were alone on the slope. They had stopped to share the pleasure of the moment. All was quiet. A hushed beauty filled the crisp vista. The leaves of all the trees were sugar-coated and glittered in the low sun. The smell of pine rose in the air.

But something was wrong. Something was out of place in the woods. Emma saw it first. It was a mound of bright yellow. Closer inspection proved it to be a ski parka. And beneath it was the body of its owner. The man was lying face down in the snow at the base of one of the trees. The blood near his head, and the gun nearby, suggested that this was no ordinary ski accident.

By noon the authorities had arrived; the person in charge was Inspector Frick. He was a drab little man who spent too much time combing his tiny mustache to be of any use to anyone. Still, it was Frick who discovered a clue at the crime scene. While studying the body, he suddenly leaned over and flicked at the snow where a small rectangular strip of gold metal was lying half buried.

"It is the identification plaque from a ski," Frick said. His voice had the low drone of a weak electric razor. "Perhaps from the murderer's ski, if we are lucky. The number 130 is engraved on it. We shall see."

Leaving everything intact and a policeman to guard the area, Frick returned with the Steeles to the lodge. In a small alcove off the main room, they were joined by the assistant manager of the hotel who nervously showed Frick a ledger from the ski shop.

"You are the one who found the body?" the Inspector said, eyeing Steele coldly.

"My wife and I," Steele answered. "We were just . . ."

"And how precisely did you know where to look for it?"

"I always look under the third pine on the left," Steele said.

But Frick's expression was one of suspicion, not amusement.

"We didn't know," Emma said, trying to save the moment. "It was pure luck."

"I see," Frick said. "And you did not know this . . . Mister . . ."

As Frick snapped his fingers twice in the air, the assistant manager jumped up and handed the Inspector a piece of paper.

"This Mister Stauben," Frick went on. "You did not know him?"

"No," Steele said, still not realizing where the questions were leading.

"I see," Frick said, smiling wanly. "And yet you were able to go directly to his body. A body half-buried on one of seventy miles of slopes at Bad Schussberg! How, may I ask, was that possible?"

He said this with grand drama, inspired by too many Agatha Christie novels. Steele suddenly realized that Frick was looking at him like a suspect — half squinting, half glaring. Emma, finding the whole thing ludicrous, took a few cautious steps back from her husband.

"Come to think of it," she said dramatically, "it *is* a pretty strange coincidence, darling."

"Ha," Steele said without a trace of humor.

Frick, he thought, was just dull enough to take her seriously.

"You perhaps think we are provincial here, Mr. Steele," Frick said. "Mountain folk, as you Americans might say. But I assure you that we are quite aware of the situation we have before us. Quite aware."

"We are?" Steele said dumbly.

"We know all about this Mister Stauben."

"We do?"

"Henrick Stauben," the Inspector began, pacing the room in a parody of self-importance. "A minor jewel thief. We have a full dossier on him. But it makes for dull reading, I assure you. A second-rate crook. A mere speck in the annals of crime. We know he traveled from resort to resort, preying on the rich."

"Why didn't you arrest him then?" Steele asked, as he carved Emma's name in the frost forming on the window.

"Perhaps we have more important things to do," Frick answered. Then he leaned in towards Steele with all the menace of a squirrel. "Or perhaps we were hoping some other crook would take care of him for us. Perhaps one has. You, for instance, Mr. Steele."

"Me? What makes you think that?"

"The plaque in the snow, Mr. Steele. It bears the number 130. And that is precisely the number of your ski rental this morning."

He shoved the ledger in front of Steele to prove the point.

"This is ridiculous," Steele said. "Maybe it fell off my ski when we *found* the body."

"Perhaps," Frick said without conviction. "But I see that you have the face of a murderer. Unfortunately for you, I am a student of physiognomy. Your nose betrays you."

John tried to look down his nose, but the effort hurt his eyes.

"This is nonsense," Emma Steele finally interjected.

"Indeed?" Frick asked. "Because your husband could not harm a flea. How many times have I heard that before?"

"No. Because I know who the real murderer is!"

The announcement caught everyone off guard. But no one as much as John Steele himself.

"Honey," Steele said, dripping with kindness as he pulled her closer and whispered, "thanks for the help. But let's not get deeper into this than we have to."

"But I do know who did it," she insisted.

"If this is a ploy," Frick warned, "do not waste our time. I am not as stupid as you may think."

"You couldn't possibly be," John said dryly.

"It's no ploy," Emma explained. "Yesterday afternoon I went out on the main deck in front of the lodge to get a cup of tea. Remember, John?"

"That's right, at about four o'clock," he said.

"While I was sitting there, I overheard a conversation between three people on the deck below. One of them was the dead man. This Stauben guy. He was wearing that same yellow and red outfit. He was arguing with two others. I guess they didn't notice me."

"And what was this argument about?" Frick asked.

"I don't know exactly. It was only partly in English. But the word diamond came up a lot. And you said this Stauben character was a jewel thief. Well, there you are."

"Where we are?" the Inspector said densely.

"Obviously Stauben was in cahoots with these two other people."

"Cahoots? Where is this Cahoots?"

"He knew them. They were arguing about a diamond. I'll bet one of them killed him."

"Who were these two others?"

"I only caught a glimpse of them. One of them was an attractive young woman wearing white. The other was a man. Tall, very regal looking. He was wearing a black jacket."

"And why have you not mentioned this until now?"

"I didn't realize what it meant until just now."

Frick mumbled in German with the assistant manager for a few moments, then they both dashed off to the main room of the lodge where the other guests had gathered.

"Is this for real?" John asked Emma, when the others had left. "You're not making this up to save my hide?"

"I didn't know your hide needed saving."

"It might, with that idiot on the case."

"You didn't kill Stauben, did you? Tell me now, so I don't make a fool of myself."

"I did," John confessed sadly. "It was the *wurst*."

"Poor dear," she giggled, patting him gently, she knew exactly what he meant.

When Frick and the manager returned to the room, they were accompanied by two other guests. One was a beautiful woman in a sleek white turtleneck. She moved smoothly, like a snow leopard, into the small alcove and took a seat. Her name was Erika Von Damme. The other guest was a courtly German who called himself Baron Obermayer. He was tall and aristocratic, with the slightest hint of a permanent sneer on his lips. Every bit the jet-setting prince.

Emma Steele nodded to Frick as they walked in. They were indeed the ones she had seen arguing with the dead man.

"Now then," Frick said, once they had all been introduced, "let us go over the facts, if you please. Beginning with you, Baron. You knew Henrick Stauben?"

"Oh yes indeed," Obermayer began, "an amusing little man. Full of intrigue. It seems he had a diamond ring he was trying to sell. He thought that I might be interested in purchasing it."

"And you were not?" Frick asked.

"The ring was obviously stolen. Not my cup of tea at all."

"Why did you not report this stolen ring?"

"Inspector, I am a Baron. On ski holiday. Not a cop."

"And did you kill Herr Stauben?" Frick asked bluntly.

"The subtle approach," Emma Steele commented.

"Don't be ridiculous," the Baron replied. "Why would I do that?"

"For the diamond ring, of course," Erika Von Damme interjected.

She turned her cool green eyes on the Baron and seemed to pin him to the spot. Her voice was a perfect mix of winter chill and simmering heat.

"Erika, please. This is serious business," Obermayer pleaded.

"So is the ring," she replied. "No ordinary rock, after all."

"Meaning what, precisely?" Frick asked her.

"That little toad Stauben happened upon the Grimaldi diamond. He didn't even know what it was until I told him. The fool."

"And why was he discussing it with you?"

"He was hopelessly in love with me," she said, dismissing the memory with a swat of her hand. "He offered me the ring if I would run off with him."

"You refused?"

"I would sooner romance a fungus," she said. "But I recognized the ring as belonging to Princess Grimaldi, who is staying at the hotel. Anyone would know it. Except Stauben of course."

"You did not tell the Princess of the theft?" Inspector Frick asked.

"I was going to, but I never had the chance. He killed the little toad first."

She was pointing to Baron Obermayer.

"Delightful, Erika," the Baron said. "Most amusing, as always. Now be so kind as to explain *why* I would do such a thing."

"For the diamond. You knew he had it in his possession. Easier to kill him and take it for yourself."

"But you knew he had it too, my dear," the Baron countered. "Perhaps *you* killed him for it."

Their argument was quickly interrupted by the sound of laughter. It was coming from a man standing at the edge of the alcove. He had apparently been in the shadows for quite a while. As he stepped forward into the light, his sinister silhouette gave way to an amiable demeanor. He was a sturdy fellow with a friendly wide face, all decked out in lederhosen and a Tyrolean hat.

"Nice knickers," Emma Steele quipped, as he entered the room.

"I'm sorry," the man said, controlling his glee, "but it is all so terribly amusing, no?"

"And who are you?" Frick asked.

"Klaus Glüder at your service," he said, bowing quickly. "I like your stories. All of you. Oh very much. Like a good American novel. The truth is quite another matter however. Stauben stole the ring all right. But he had two accomplices. One man. And one woman. The woman to keep Princess Grimaldi occupied last night while Stauben stole the ring. The man to take it safely from Bad Schussberg and sell it. But there was an argument about how to split the money."

"And how do you come to this information?" Frick asked.

"Stauben told me himself early this morning. I confronted him once the ring was gone because I knew he must have stolen it."

"And you are . . ."

"A private guard hired by Princess Grimaldi."

"I knew he had the dull pallor of a policeman," Obermayer said disdainfully.

"Now as to which of you innocent couples here are the accomplices, that I cannot say," Glüder admitted. "But someone is lying."

Frick, for his part, had the answer, and he grinned mildly at John Steele as he imagined the praise he would get for putting him behind bars.

"You were able to get the ring back from Stauben?" the Inspector continued.

"No," Glüder said. "He said he had to get it back from his associate. I arranged to return to his room an hour later to reclaim it. I knocked. He didn't answer the door which was unlocked, so I entered. But he wasn't there. I found this instead."

He handed a piece of paper to Frick, who studied it, then read it aloud. It was a suicide note written and signed by Stauben.

"Another little twist," Emma Steele said.

"Naturally," Obermayer said, oozing thick charm. "This is Bavaria. The pretzel was invented here."

"Are you a real Baron, Baron?" Emma asked him.

He took her hand and looked deep into her eyes.

"Perhaps, my dear, in the dim past there was a castle or two in my family. But these days it's merely a term of distinction. Bestowed by bureaucrats."

"Like an inmate number," Erika Von Damme suggested.

"Are we finished here?" Obermayer said with impatience. "There is still time to get in a final run."

"We are not finished," Frick said.

"But it is all explained. The little toad killed himself. We are off the hook, as it were."

"I am not so sure," Frick said joylessly. "We shall see what to make of this when we return to the body. All of us."

"Oh no," Emma said. "Not again. I can't. I have this strange kind of asthma. I get sick around people who can't breathe."

"Come on darling," John said with lunatic gaiety, "it's off to the crime scene!"

The body was just the same as when Emma first noticed it. Nothing had been touched. Everyone was quite satisfied with the idea that Stauben had killed himself. And it seemed for a moment as though Frick himself was willing to leave it at that. But then Emma spoke up.

"At least one thing is clear," she said. "He didn't commit suicide. He was murdered."

"Emma?" John Steele said, wincing. "You'll have to excuse her. Dead bodies confuse her."

"Look," Emma insisted. "It's all here in plain sight. Proof that Stauben didn't kill himself. And a clue to the identity of the murderer."

Assemble the puzzle and see if you can find the clues indicating that Stauben was murdered and who the murderer was.

The Solution:

“No you won’t,” Steele said. “Because it’s right here.”
diamond ring as well, I trust.”
“Do not worry. We shall find him,” Frick said, motioning to the policeman. “And the
They all turned to confront Baron Obermayer, but he was nowhere to be seen.
130. Those are initials. The letters B and O. A monogram that stands for”
ski all right. But it isn’t from one of the rental skis. It’s different. And it doesn’t show the number
different from the one on Staben’s rental ski suddenly made sense to him. “It’s a plaque from a
“Wrong again, Holmes,” Steele said. The fact that the plaque lying in the snow was slightly
plaque fell off your husband’s ski. Or you might have gotten away with it.”
“Of course,” Frick said as though he had known all along. “Too bad the identification
him, and left the gun and the suicide note to fool the police.”
of his ski glove could never have fit into the trigger of the gun. That means someone else shot
“Staben couldn’t possibly have shot himself,” Emma began, “because the padded fingers

Can you find the missing diamond ring?

The Solution: Part 2

Steele bent down over the corpse, took the lift ticket in his hands and burst it apart. The
stolen ring popped out.
“I noticed the bulge under the ripped ticket,” Steele explained. “Staben must have refused
to hand it over to Obermayer, and instead hid it between the sticky sides of the folded ticket.
He handed the ring to the inspector, then turned to his wife.
“Don’t tell me this isn’t better than some old postcards,” he said, smiling.
“All right, I won’t,” she said, smiling back.