

WEIRD CRIMES

No. 3. *The Magic Mirror Murders*

By SEABURY QUINN

"**W**IE GEHTS, Barbara," the blacksmith of the little Bavarian hamlet of Loisenrieth greeted the daughter of Peter Reisinger.

"*Wie gehts, landsmann,*" pretty Barbara replied from her doorstep. "Think you yon cloud bodes ill weather this morning?"

The blacksmith studied a fleck of cotton-wool vapor riding languidly across the blue German sky, then turned his smile on Barbara again.

"*Nein,*" he opined, "'tis but a wind cloud. But why so anxious about the weather? Is it to a picnic party you go, all decked in your pretties?"

Barbara brushed the tip of her nose with a tiny cluster of corn flowers plucked from her father's dooryard. Indeed, as the blacksmith had said, she was dressed in her finest. A cloth skirt, a neat little jacket of the same material, a blouse of coarse linen, spotlessly laundered, pinchbeck ear-rings—even stockings of white cotton and leather shoes were among her morning finery. And by this last it might be known she was wearing the very best her wardrobe afforded, for poverty rode heavily on the shoulders of the Bavarian peasantry in 1807, and both men and women went barefoot, or shod with wood, except upon gala occasions. Stockings and leather shoes were worn only to mass, in celebration of the King's birthday, or other extraordinary fetes.

The girl smiled coquettishly at her neighbor.

"Perhaps I go to look for work; perhaps to seek a husband—who knows?" she answered.

"But—" the blacksmith began, then broke off with a puzzled shake of his head. The ways of young folks were beyond him. He resumed his way toward his forge, while Barbara set out in the opposite direction along the hamlet's single street.

When the day's work was done the blacksmith returned to his home and his evening meal of black bread and pea soup. But Barbara did not return that

night. Barbara did not return at all. It was as if she had walked over the rim of the earth at the horizon.

Her parents made frantic inquiries for her; weeks and months went by; but no one could tell them of her whereabouts.

Village heads were shaken, dire surmises of her fate were uttered by local wiseacres, and her disappearance had taken its place in neighborhood tradition, almost, when gossip was suddenly revived by the disappearance of Katherine Seidel, a belle of the neighboring community of Regendorf.

Early in January, 1808, Katherine had set out from her father's house, also dressed in the best clothes she possessed. Like Barbara, she answered questions concerning her destination evasively, and like Barbara, she seemed to vanish like a smoke wreath from her grandsire's pipe. She was gone. And no one could—or would—give any news of her.

Matters might have simmered down in her case as in that of Barbara Reisinger, had it not been that Katherine's elder sister, Wallburga Seidel, was a spinster of more than ordinary firmness of purpose. While others shrugged their shoulders over Katherine's disappearance—some even hinting the path she had taken led to the sort of ease purchased with shame—Wallburga insisted her little sister was the victim of foul play. So vehemently did she assert this belief to all she talked with that the neighbors began to look upon her with a sort of tolerant pity.

One day, early in the spring of 1808, Wallburga was passing through the public market of Regendorf when she espied, with amazement, a bit of cloth she recognized as coming from the skirt Katherine had worn the morning she left home.

Entering the shop, she excitedly demanded whence the cloth came. After a moment's hesitation the Hebrew proprietor of the place informed her he had bought the goods from a certain Frau Bichel, wife of Andrew Bichel, a day-

laborer who lived nearby. He volunteered the further information that Frau Bichel was one of his regular customers, trading cloth and trinkets for goods, and often selling him garments or cloth remnants for cash.

Though this offered no real evidence to support her suspicions, Wallburga felt more convinced than ever that her sister had been murdered or spirited away, and determined to find what part Bichel had played in the mystery.

With greater cunning than might have been expected from one of her station in life, she went not directly to Bichel's house, but to the neighborhood in which he lived. Pretending to be in search of work, she interviewed every household in the vicinity of the Bichel home, bringing in the Bichel family incidentally in her conversation and adding together such scraps of information as different neighbors let drop. That night she reviewed the result of her work, and found herself in possession of the following facts and rumors:

Andrew Bichel, a day-laborer and the son of a day-laborer, was about forty-eight years old. Because of his indolence he was usually out of employment, and the small vegetable garden before his house was more productive of weeds than any other crop.

About a year before, however, his fortunes had suddenly taken a turn for the better. He had, in some way, secured a couple of pigs, a goat and several geese, and had been heard to boast of the contemplated purchase of a cow. None of the neighbors could account for this sudden prosperity, since Bichel had been, if possible, lazier since his fortunes began to mend than before.

His clothing, and that of his wife, was noticeably better than formerly, and, disregarding the usual custom of having all his garments made at home, he had fallen to patronizing a nearby tailor, he supplying the materials, while the tailor fashioned the garments.

Bichel was noted for his good nature, or, rather, for his lack of aggressiveness,

in former days having permitted himself to be bested in every encounter, whether physical or verbal, rather than defend himself. He was known for a coward, both physical and moral, always seeking to ingratiate himself with those he met, and resorting to the most servile flattery in order to secure the barest toleration from his acquaintances. Of late he had achieved greater esteem among a certain element of the locality, since he had shown a willingness to buy beer for whoever would consent to drink with him at the inn.

It must be remembered that fiscal conditions in the Germany of that day were as stringent as those of the post-war period, only the pressure was from exactly the opposite direction. In the disorganization following the World War the republic suffered from an inflated currency—literally from too much money. In 1908, poverty was due to lack of money of any sort, and a few pence, secured by the sale of articles of little intrinsic worth, might easily raise a peasant to a position far above that of his struggling neighbors, whose whole time was occupied in securing the barest necessities of life.

Bearing this in mind, we can realize how articles of practically no value, provided they could be obtained without cost, might enable a poverty-crushed German to outdistance his fellows—a floating log is valueless to the man on shore; to the spent swimmer it may mean salvation.

Wallburga Seidel was aware of all this; a lifetime of poverty had impressed her with a very definite appreciation of values, even the value of a piece of secondhand clothing. *And her sister had worn an entire outfit of new clothing, besides several articles of cheap jewelry on the day she disappeared.*

Wallburga pondered the information she had gleaned for several days before she again sought the neighborhood where Bichel lived. A few guarded inquiries disclosed the name of the tailor Bichel patronized. She located his shop, and, pretending faintness from the heat (it was early May), went in and begged a drink of water.

While the tradesman fetched her a cup, she inspected his shop, and suddenly started forward in her seat. Upon a hook, ready for delivery, hung a waistcoat, and it was made of cloth such as her vanished sister had worn for a cloak when last seen.

"*Danke schoen,*" she told the tailor, draining the dipper he handed her. Then, as she rose to leave, she turned, surveying his wares carelessly. "That waistcoat,"

she said, pointing to the garment which had set her pulses racing, "it is a pretty thing. You make it for some *graff*—some great gentleman—no?"

"*Nein,*" laughed the tailor, shaking his head. "No great gentleman comes to this shop. I make it for a neighbor, one Herr Bichel.

"Yes, it is pretty, is it not?" he added, stroking the soft cloth. "Almost, I think, too pretty for man's wear. 'Twould be better in a lady's cloak, not?"

"*Ja, ja!*" ejaculated Wallburga, chokingly, as she stumbled from the astonished tailor's place. "Yes, yes, for a lady's cloak, to be sure!" And she burst into peals of hysterical laughter.

"Oh, sister, dear little sister," she sobbed as she half walked, half ran along the dusty road toward Bichel's house, "some one has done you an injury. But Wallburga will find out. Wallburga will never rest till she has found you. And—" she clenched her work-worn hands in frenzy—"and if they have dared to harm you—*ach Gott!*—'twould be better for them had they never seen the sun!"

A few minutes' hurried walk brought her to Bichel's door, upon which she hammered unceremoniously. Bichel himself answered her summons, smiling pleasantly.

"You wished to see me?" he inquired politely.

"Wretch!" Wallburga cried. "My sister; my little sister, Katherine—what have you done with her?"

Bichel's pale features remained politely inquiring. Not the tremor of a muscle betrayed her words had touched an uneasy conscience.

"Katherine?" he repeated, as though puzzled. "What Katherine? I know many young ladies by that name."

Choking with emotion, Wallburga declared herself the sister of the vanished Katherine Seidel, and again demanded an account of her sister.

Bichel heard her through, then repeated his declaration of innocence. He knew no Katherine Seidel, he insisted; never remembered having known a girl by that name. The *fraulein* was mistaken. She was excited. The heat, perhaps. Would not the *fraulein* enter and partake of a cup of goat's milk? It had a very soothing effect on those affected by the unseasonable spring heat.

So sincere he seemed, and so genuinely anxious to help her that Wallburga's suspicions were almost disarmed. But there was the evidence of the piece of cloth in the market stall, and the new waistcoat at the tailor's.

Wallburga left the Bichel home and sought the *Untersuchungs Richter*, or Provincial Magistrate.

The police system of Bavaria at that time was decidedly defective. Indeed, as we understand the term today, there was practically none. Each village had its constable, or police officer, whose duties were more of a supervisory than a police nature. He seldom, if ever, patrolled the streets, nor did his authority extend beyond the impounding of misdemeanants.

In addition to these purely local and inefficient officers, there was the gendarmerie, or military police, whose duties were twofold, the protection of the government from political offenders, and the enforcement of the magistrates' mandates. In this latter duty, which was wholly subordinate to that of arresting political enemies of the crown, they acted almost as our modern bailiffs or United States marshals, not attempting action on their own initiative; but waiting the direction of the magistrate. A certificate of suspicion from the examining judge was necessary to set the police machinery in motion, as a warrant from a U. S. Commissioner or judge is required before lawful search and seizure may be made in this country.

But slow-moving and inadequate as the Bavarian gendarmerie of a century ago was, it possessed the German characteristic of thoroughness, and once a magistrate's order was handed them, the officers kept at their task till they had some definite report to make.

With painstaking care the gendarmes interrogated every resident within a mile of Bichel's home, making voluminous notes of the answers they received. Their investigation began on May 19, 1808; by nightfall they had taken testimony from every man, woman and child in Bichel's neighborhood, and had gleaned one fact of prime importance—several young girls had gone to Bichel's house "to see their fortunes in a glass." And, though several neighbors had testified to this, *not one could be found who could say he had seen one of the girls since.*

In the forenoon of May 20 two sergeants of police went to Bichel's house. He was gone to a nearby fair where goods of all descriptions—including second-hand clothing—were bought and sold.

The officers walked round the house, inspected the outbuildings, glanced at the garden and returned to the doorstep. Lighting their porcelain pipes, they seated themselves in the shade. Bichel must return some time—every-

one came home sooner or later—life was relatively long, and a day of waiting mattered little. Besides, sitting in the shade was vastly preferable to marching over miles of dusty road to the fair.

A nervously energetic Latin, or an efficient Anglo-Saxon policeman would have exhibited symptoms of hydrophobia at sight of such tactics; but the Germans understood German psychology. At nightfall Bichel returned, his pockets clinking with copper and silver, the proceeds of his day's trading, and the sergeants matter-of-factly placed him under arrest.

There was no haste in the proceedings. Bichel was permitted thirty-six hours in solitary confinement to allow his conscience to begin its work, then summoned before the examining judge.

This official kept the prisoner waiting beside his table for several minutes while he pretended to be busily examining some papers. At length he looked up, staring at Bichel as though he had been some novel sort of animal. "Do you know the reason for your arrest, Andrew Bichel?" he asked, at length.

"*Nein, Mein Herr,*" replied the prisoner with a servile bow.

"So?" The magistrate raised his eyebrows. "You do not? Very well." He motioned to a gendarme, and Bichel was conducted back to his solitary cell.

Another day and night elapsed, and Bichel was again led into the magistrate's presence.

"Andrew Bichel," said the judge, "tell me why you are arrested."

"*Mein Herr,*" replied Bichel, "upon the Holy Cross, I cannot imagine."

"Then you must have a few days of rest and quiet to stimulate your imagination," the magistrate answered.

There were no such things as writs of *habeas corpus* in Bavaria. When a prisoner refused to talk he was lodged in solitary confinement until his tongue loosened.

Andrew Bichel spent a week more in his cell, during which he heard no voice and saw no human face, even his food being passed to him through a small opening in his dungeon door, which permitted him no sight of his jailors.

Seven days' meditation eroded Bichel's resolution; the next time he faced the judge he was ready to talk.

As before the magistrate asked, "Andrew Bichel, do you know why you are arrested?"

"Yes, *Mein Herr,*" answered the prisoner, "it is in connection with the disappearance of Katherine Seidel."

"And Barbara Reisinger, what of her?" supplemented the judge.

"Ye-yes, your worship," faltered Bichel, "and Barbara Reisinger, too."

"Where are they; what did you do with them?" the magistrate demanded.

"Oh, *Mein Herr,*" the trembling wretch protested, "I did nothing with them. On the Holy Tree, by the beard of St. Andrew, my patron, I did them no injury. They came to me—they pestered me to get them their fortunes told. I knew a man—no, your excellence, I do not know his name, nor whence he comes—I knew a certain man who can divine the future. This man—he has but one eye, your exaltedness, and is also plagued with a goitre—this man came to my poor house and showed these misguided girls their future husbands in a peep-show."

"A peep-show?" echoed the judge. "What kind of peep-show?"

"A crystal ball, your nobleness."

"A crystal ball? Did you not say it was a peep-show?"

"Yes, your honorableness, but I meant a crystal ball, such as Eastern fakirs use."

"What know you of Eastern fakirs, Andrew Bichel?"

"Your worship, I have read—"

"Andrew Bichel," interrupted the magistrate, "I can read that you are an unconscionable liar. Back to your cell, rogue! You will be questioned anon, when you are ready to tell the truth."

MEANTIME, the gendarmes had not been idle. Accompanied by a squad of men, a sergeant had searched the Bichel homestead from rooftop to cellar. In an upper room, concealed beneath a heap of trash, two roomy chests had been discovered. When the padlocks on their lids were forced, they were found literally crammed with articles of feminine apparel. Linens, skirts, jackets, cloaks, leather shoes, stockings, bits of cheap jewelry like that worn by peasant belles, combs, undergarments—enough clothing to have outfitted a small village of middle-class peasant girls was recovered from these trunks.

Most important to the prosecution, articles definitely identified as having been worn by Barbara Reisinger and Katherine Seidel were found among the chests' contents.

The judge ordered a careful inventory made of these things, and commanded the searchers to continue their work.

Scarcely believing more evidence would be unearthed, the police proceeded to make a cursory investigation of the land and outbuildings, without bringing anything more to light. But one of them was suddenly struck with the idea of utilizing a four-footed assistant.

A hunting dog was secured and turned loose in the grounds. The animal seemed at fault for some time; but when one of the officers led him into the dark shed at the rear of the lot, he betrayed increased interest.

Against this shed's rear wall was stacked a pile of manure, the pungent ammonia gas it gave off obscuring all other odors which reached the men's noses. But the dog was not to be thus fooled. He attacked the base of the pile with his fore-paws, dug tentatively a moment, then, abruptly, seated himself, pointed his muzzle skyward and emitted a dismal, long-drawn-out howl. Country bred, the policemen recognized the sound. Only too often they had heard dogs give vent to the "death cry" when members of their masters' families had died.

"*Herr Gott!*" cried one of the men, while another crossed himself piously.

A digging fork was brought and the police attacked the dung heap. Beneath a litter of straw, quite near the surface, the lower half of a woman's body was found. The clayey soil, in combination with the straw and the manure, which shut away the air, had completely foiled the murderer's purpose. Instead of decomposing, the flesh was almost perfectly preserved, though saponification had taken place to some extent.

Feverishly, now, the police dug. A torso, the arms, finally a severed head, were brought to light. Katherine Seidel was found.

For several days the officers prosecuted their search, each succeeding excavation revealing a fresh villainy. Poor, vain little Barbara Reisinger was taken from the unconsecrated grave where she had lain nearly a year, and the bodies of other girls, not reported to the authorities, were brought forth to keep her company.

But the most ghastly phase of this terrible case appeared when surgeons summoned to view the bodies handed in their reports. In every case the women's throats bore evidence of wounds, but in no instance were these wounds sufficient to have caused immediate death. The opinion of the doctors was that *the women had been dismembered while still alive.*

The preliminary evidence secured, the examination of Andrew Bichel began.

Under the criminal code then in force in Bavaria, there were no "rules of evidence" as common law lawyers know them. Every fact germane to the case in hand was to be elicited. The accused was not permitted to face his accusers, nor was he permitted to refuse to testify against himself. The *Untersuchungs*

Richter, or examining judge, combined the duties of prosecuting attorney and police judge, being charged with the double office of examining into the crime and committing the prisoner (if the evidence warranted it) to jail to await trial by the central criminal court of the district. Prisoners might not be tortured into confession, the rack having been formally abolished by law in 1806; but they were held in close confinement during the entire period of their examination, which sometimes lasted for months.

The science of psychoanalysis had not been dreamed of in those days; yet something closely akin to it obtained in the Bavarian courts. The examining magistrate would ask the prisoner innumerable questions, many of them having only the most remote bearing on the case. Yet, at intervals, there would be sandwiched in questions of the utmost importance—questions which, coming amid irrelevant queries, might easily startle the accused into a damaging admission. All questions and answers were reduced to writing by a notary, and any unusual length of time taken by the accused in answering a given question, his demeanor at the propounding of questions calculated to elicit damaging replies, and similar facts were also noted in the minutes of the examination.*

Despite his declared intention of telling all, Bichel fenced skillfully with the judge for several days, contradicting himself a dozen times at each session; but inevitably being led to an admission of his guilt.

At length the magistrate asked him, "did you not pretend to have a magic mirror in your possession, a mirror in which young women might see their future husbands?"

Bichel was observed to change color at this; but stoutly denied it.

The judge, unhurried, confident his questions would bring out the truth, continued at intervals to ask: "Tell us of your magic mirror, Andrew Bichel," or, "Why did you pretend to have a magic mirror?"

Persistence at last prevailed. Worn out with constant questioning, his solitary confinement between court sessions making him a prey to his accusing conscience, Bichel at length broke down and confessed.

He had let it be noised about among the peasant girls, he said, that he possessed a magic mirror in which any girl looking would see her future bridegroom.

*It is to this faithful noting of the most minute details in the transcripts of these criminal examinations that we owe our ability to record practically all the important incidents in trials held more than a century ago.—Editor.

And, to sweeten the bait for the silly flies he purposed catching in his web, he also said he would accept no fee for a look at this marvelous glass. But she who would see its secrets must come secretly—otherwise the charm would be broken—and she must come dressed in her best, as she would wish to appear when first beholding her future husband. His plan succeeded with shameless ease. So fast the girls applied that he had to turn some away for fear of conflicting "engagements."

The procedure was the same in each case. The victim was shown a piece of board about which a towel had been wrapped. This was the magic mirror. When the wrappings were removed, Bichel assured his dupe, the future bridegroom would stand revealed. But first he must pronounce an incantation and the girl must help him. With her own pocket handkerchief he bandaged her eyes, binding her hands behind her back with a piece of packing thread. Then, standing before the smiling girl, he pronounced these words: "Maiden, behold thy bridegroom. His name is—DEATH!" So saying, he struck her in the throat with a butcher knife he had concealed in his sleeve.

A basin was ready. He eased the terrified girl to the floor, placing the vessel where it would catch the blood from her wound, lest her clothes be stained, and so rendered unsalable. For it was for their clothing and a few tawdry trinkets that he had murdered all these innocent, credulous girls.

When the victim was exhausted, he undressed her, folded her clothes up neatly, ready to be packed in his "treasure" chests upstairs, and proceeded leisurely to dismember and bury her body.

The astounded judge asked, "But why did you anatomize them before they were dead?"

To this Bichel made the astonishing reply: "Your excellence, they squirmed. It was delightful!"

WHEN the tedious process of collecting all available evidence at length came to an end, the written report of Bichel's case, comprising several volumes of closely-written German script, was certified to the central criminal court by the examining judge.

"Weary lawyers with endless tongues" had no opportunity to address the court under the Bavarian criminal code. The defendant's legal adviser was allowed to read the transcript of testimony taken before the examining judge, then to prepare a written defense of his client. In this brief he might base his defense on either the law or the facts,

or both, and might use as much space as he deemed necessary; but he might not appear in person before the court. Thus it was that many an advocate won fame as a criminal practitioner, yet had never seen the judges whose decisions his pleas swayed!

Bichel's counsel did the best he could with the handicap under which he labored, and the central criminal court doubtless read his learned defense attentively; but the result of the case was foregone.

On February 4, 1809, nearly a year after his arrest, Andrew Bichel was led into court to hear his sentence.

It was an impressive scene. The judges in their robes of office, trimmed with ermine, the royal fur, in token of their right to dispense the King's justice, sat before a long table of age-darkened oak raised three steps above the court room floor. Behind them, and before the doors and windows of the hall, stood halberdiers in coats of green and gold, the sunlight glinting on the polished heads of their weapons. The official justicer—the headsman—stood beside the steps leading to the judges' table.

A crowd had gathered to hear sentence pronounced, and broke into murmurs of suppressed rage as two stalwart jailors led the prisoner before the judges. The clamor of halberd butts on the floor brought instant silence, for the halberdiers were not slow to rap for order on the heads of the rabble if their first admonition to silence went unheeded.

Bichel halted before the judges' table, and the president of the court rose, facing him. In one hand he held a parchment scroll. Before him, on the table, lay a light wand of dried willow. The prisoner's pale face went a shade whiter as he beheld this, for well he knew what the wand portended.

A pause. The judge unrolled his parchment and read the sentence:

"That Andrew Bichel, of Regendorf, be dragged to the place of execution, and be not carried or allowed to walk; that he there be broken on the wheel from the feet upwards, without the previous mercy stroke, and that his body be afterwards exposed on the wheel as a warning to evil-doers."

As he finished, the president picked up the willow wand, snapped it in two and cast the pieces at Bichel's feet. This was to signify that as the wood was separated in two parts, so should the condemned man's soul and body be severed in the furtherance of the King's justice.

Almost insane with terror, Bichel was dragged from the court room, his vain pleas for mercy ringing fainter and

fainter till the closing of his dungeon door shut them off completely.

Well he knew the fate awaiting him. He would be tied against a great cart-wheel so that he hung like a fly caught in a web of a giant spider. Then, with a heavy sledge-hammer, the brawny executioner would rain blow after blow upon him, breaking the bones of his legs and arms, his ribs, finally crushing his skull. In ordinary cases the headsman would have given him the blow on the head first, so that the others would have been but savage mutilation of his dead body; but his sentence had expressly provided that he should "be broken on the wheel from the feet upwards without the customary mercy stroke." He would die slowly, horribly. The thought drove him shrieking against the unyielding door of his cell, striking it with his fists, crying aloud for mercy—he who had shown no pity to the girls whose finery he coveted.

Next morning, when they led him out to die, he gave a great shout of joy as he beheld the executioner. For that grim official leaned upon the handle of a great sword, not on the helve of his terrible hammer.

The court had reconsidered its decision during the night, and commuted his sentence to death by beheading, saying, "It is below the dignity of the state to vie with a criminal in cruelty."

This is the Third of a Series of Unusual Articles that Seabury Quinn is Writing for WEIRD TALES. The Fourth Will be Published in an Early Issue.

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