

CAN THE DOUBLE MURDER?

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To the Editor of "The Sun."

SIR,—One morning in 1867 Eastern Europe was startled by news of the most horrifying description. Michael Obrenovitch, reigning Prince of Serbia, his aunt, the Princess Catherine, or Katinka, and her daughter had been murdered in broad daylight, near Belgrade, in their own garden, assassin or assassins remaining unknown. The Prince had received several bullet-shots and stabs, and his body was actually butchered; the Princess was killed on the spot, her head smashed, and her young daughter, though still alive, was not expected to survive. The circumstances are too recent to have been forgotten, but in that part of the world, at the time, the case created a delirium of excitement.

In the Austrian dominions and in those under the doubtful protectorate of Turkey, from Bucharest down to Trieste, no high family felt secure. In those half-Oriental countries every Montecchi has its Capuletti, and it was rumoured that the bloody deed was perpetrated by the Prince Kara-Gueorguevitch, or "Tzerno-Gueorgey," as he is usually called in those parts. Several persons innocent of the act were, as is usual in such cases, imprisoned, and the real murderers escaped justice. A young relative of the victim, greatly beloved by his people, a mere child, taken for the purpose from a school in Paris, was brought over in ceremony to Belgrade and proclaimed Hospodar of Serbia. In the turmoil of political excitement the tragedy of Belgrade was forgotten by all but an old Serbian matron who had been attached to the Obrenovitch family, and who, like Rachel, would not be comforted for the death of her children. After the proclamation of the young Obrenovitch, nephew of the murdered man, she had sold out her property and disappeared; but not before taking a solemn vow on the tombs of the victims to avenge their deaths.

The writer of this truthful narrative had passed a few days at Belgrade, about three months before the horrid deed was perpetrated, and knew the Princess Katinka. She was a kind, gentle, and lazy creature at home; abroad she seemed a Parisienne in manners and education. As nearly all the personages who will figure in this true story are still living, it is but decent that I should withhold their names, and give only initials.

The old Serbian lady seldom left her house, going but to see the Princess occasionally. Crouched on a pile of pillows and carpeting, clad in the picturesque national dress, she looked like the Cumæn sibyl in her days of calm repose. Strange stories were whispered about her Occult knowledge, and thrilling accounts circulated sometimes among the guests assembled round the fireside of the modest inn. Our fat landlord's maiden aunt's cousin had been troubled for some time past by a wandering vampire, and had been bled nearly to death by the nocturnal visitor, and while the efforts and exorcisms of the parish pope had been of no avail, the victim was luckily delivered by Gospoja P——, who had put to flight the disturbing ghost by merely shaking her fist at him, and shaming him in his own language. It was in Belgrade that I learned for

the first time this highly-interesting fact in philology, namely, that spooks have a language of their own. The old lady, whom I will call Gospoja P——, was generally attended by another personage destined to be the principal actress in our tale of horror. It was a young gypsy girl from some part of Roumania, about fourteen years of age. Where she was born, and who she was, she seemed to know as little as anyone else. I was told she had been brought one day by a party of strolling gypsies, and left in the yard of the old lady, from which moment she became an inmate of the house. She was nicknamed "the sleeping girl," as she was said to be gifted with the faculty of apparently dropping asleep wherever she stood, and speaking her dreams aloud. The girl's heathen name was Froся.

About eighteen months after the news of the murder had reached Italy, where I was at the time, I travelled over the Banat in a small waggon of my own, hiring a horse whenever I needed one. I met on my way an old Frenchman, a scientist, travelling alone after my own fashion, but with the difference that while he was a pedestrian, I dominated the road from the eminence of a throne of dry hay in a jolting waggon. I discovered him one fine morning slumbering in a wilderness of shrubs and flowers, and had nearly passed over him, absorbed as I was in the contemplation of the surrounding glorious scenery. The acquaintance was soon made, no great ceremony of mutual introduction being needed. I had heard his name mentioned in circles interested in mesmerism, and knew him to be a powerful adept of the school of Dupotet.

"I have found," he remarked, in the course of the conversation after I had made him share my seat of hay, "one of the most wonderful subjects in this lovely Thebaide. I have an appointment to-night with the family. They are seeking to unravel the mystery of a murder by means of the clairvoyance of the girl . . . she is wonderful!"

"Who is she?" I asked.

"A Roumanian gypsy. She was brought up, it appears, in the family of the Serbian reigning Prince, who reigns no more, for he was very mysteriously murdered—— Halloo, take care! *Diable*, you will upset us over the precipice!" he hurriedly exclaimed, unceremoniously snatching from me the reins, and giving the horse a violent pull.

"You do not mean Prince Obrenovitch?" I asked aghast.

"Yes, I do; and him precisely. To-night I have to be there, hoping to close a series of *séances* by finally developing a most marvellous manifestation of the hidden power of the human spirit; and you may come with me. I will introduce you; and besides, you can help me as an interpreter, for they do not speak French."

As I was pretty sure that if the somnambule was Froся, the rest of the family must be Gospoja P——, I readily accepted. At sunset we were at the foot of the mountain, leading to the old castle, as the Frenchman called the place. It fully deserved the poetical name given it. There was a rough bench in the depths of one of the shadowy retreats, and as we stopped at the entrance of this poetical

place, and the Frenchman was gallantly busying himself with my horse on the suspicious-looking bridge which led across the water to the entrance gate, I saw a tall figure slowly rise from the bench and come towards us.

It was my old friend Gospoja P——, looking more pale and more mysterious than ever. She exhibited no surprise at seeing me, but simply greeting me after the Serbian fashion, with a triple kiss on both cheeks, she took hold of my hand and led me straight to the nest of ivy. Half reclining on a small carpet spread on the tall grass, with her back leaning against the wall, I recognized our Frosya.

She was dressed in the national costume of the Wallachian women, a sort of gauze turban intermingled with various gilt medals and bands on her head, white shirt with opened sleeves, and petticoats of variegated colours. Her face looked deadly pale, her eyes were closed, and her countenance presented that stony, sphinx-like look which characterizes in such a peculiar way the entranced clairvoyant somnambule. If it were not for the heaving motion of her chest and bosom, ornamented by rows of medals and bead necklaces which feebly tinkled at every breath, one might have thought her dead, so lifeless and corpse-like was her face. The Frenchman informed me that he had sent her to sleep just as we were approaching the house, and that she now was as he had left her the previous night; he then began busying himself with the *sujet*, as he called Frosya. Paying no further attention to us, he shook her by the hand, and then making a few rapid passes stretched out her arm and stiffened it. The arm, as rigid as iron, remained in that position. He then closed all her fingers but one—the middle finger—which he caused to point at the evening star, which twinkled in the deep blue sky. Then he turned round and went over from right to left, throwing on some of his fluids here, again discharging them at another place; busying himself with his invisible but potent fluids, like a painter with his brush when giving the last touches to a picture.

The old lady, who had silently watched him, with her chin in her hand the while, put her thin, skeleton-looking hands on his arm and arrested it, as he was preparing himself to begin the regular mesmeric passes.

"Wait," she whispered, "till the star is set and the ninth hour completed. The Vourdalaki are hovering round; they may spoil the influence."

"What does she say?" enquired the mesmerizer, annoyed at her interference.

I explained to him that the old lady feared the pernicious influences of the Vourdalaki.

"Vourdalaki! What's that—the Vourdalaki?" exclaimed the Frenchman. "Let us be satisfied with Christian spirits, if they honour us to-night with a visit, and lose no time for the Vourdalaki."

I glanced at the Gospoja. She had become deathly pale and her brow was sternly knitted over her flashing black eyes.

"Tell him not to jest at this hour of the night!" she cried. "He does not know the country. Even this holy church may fail to protect us once the Vourdalaki are

roused. What's this?" pushing with her foot a bundle of herbs the botanizing mesmerizer had laid near on the grass. She bent over the collection and anxiously examined the contents of the bundle, after which she flung the whole into the water.

"It must not be left here," she firmly added; "these are the St. John's plants, and they might attract the wandering ones."

Meanwhile the night had come, and the moon illuminated the landscape with a pale, ghostly light. The nights in the Banat are nearly as beautiful as in the East, and the Frenchman had to go on with his experiments in the open air, as the priest of the church had prohibited such in the tower, which was used as the parsonage, for fear of filling the holy precincts with the heretical devils of the mesmerizer, which, the priest remarked, he would be unable to exorcise on account of their being foreigners.

The old gentleman had thrown off his travelling blouse, rolled up his shirt sleeves, and now, striking a theatrical attitude, began a regular process of mesmerization.

Under his quivering fingers the odile fluid actually seemed to flash in the twilight. Froся was placed with her figure facing the moon, and every motion of the entranced girl was discernible as in daylight. In a few minutes large drops of perspiration appeared on her brow, and slowly rolled down her pale face, glittering in the moonbeams. Then she moved uneasily about and began chanting a low melody, to the words of which the Gospoja, anxiously bent over the unconscious girl, was listening with avidity and trying to catch every syllable. With her thin finger on her lips, her eyes nearly starting from their sockets, her frame motionless, the old lady seemed herself transfixed into a statue of attention. The group was a remarkable one, and I regretted that I was not a painter. What followed was a scene worthy to figure in *Macbeth*. At one side she, the slender girl, pale and corpse-like, writhing under the invisible fluid of him who for the hour was her omnipotent master; at the other the old matron, who, burning with her unquenched fire of revenge, stood waiting for the long-expected name of the Prince's murderer to be at last pronounced. The Frenchman himself seemed transfigured, his grey hair standing on end; his bulky clumsy form seemed to have grown in a few minutes. All theatrical pretence was now gone; there remained but the mesmerizer, aware of his responsibility, unconscious himself of the possible results, studying and anxiously expecting. Suddenly Froся, as if lifted by some supernatural force, rose from her reclining posture and stood erect before us, again motionless and still, waiting for the magnetic fluid to direct her. The Frenchman, silently taking the old lady's hand, placed it in that of the somnambulist, and ordered her to put herself *en rapport* with the Gospoja.

"What seest thou, my daughter?" softly murmured the Serbian lady. "Can your spirit seek out the murderers?"

"Search and behold!" sternly commanded the mesmerizer, fixing his gaze upon the face of the subject.

"I am on my way—I go," faintly whispered Frosya, her voice seeming not to come from herself, but from the surrounding atmosphere.

At this moment something so strange took place that I doubt my ability to describe it. A luminous vapour appeared, closely surrounding the girl's body. At first about an inch in thickness, it gradually expanded, and, gathering itself, suddenly seemed to break off from the body altogether and condense itself into a kind of semi-solid vapour, which very soon assumed the likeness of the somnambule herself. Flickering about the surface of the earth the form vacillated for two or three seconds, then glided noiselessly toward the river. It disappeared like a mist, dissolved in the moonbeams, which seemed to absorb it altogether.

I had followed the scene with an intense attention. The mysterious operation, known in the East as the evocation of the *scin-lecca*, was taking place before my own eyes. To doubt was impossible, and Dupotet was right in saying that mesmerism is the conscious Magic of the ancients, and Spiritualism the unconscious effect of the same Magic upon certain organisms.

As soon as the vaporous double had smoked itself through the pores of the girl, Gospoja had, by a rapid motion of the hand which was left free, drawn from under her pelisse something which looked to us suspiciously like a small stiletto, and placed it as rapidly in the girl's bosom. The action was so quick that the mesmerizer, absorbed in his work, had not remarked it, as he afterwards told me. A few minutes elapsed in a dead silence. We seemed a group of petrified persons. Suddenly a thrilling and transpiercing cry burst from the entranced girl's lips, she bent forward, and snatching the stiletto from her bosom, plunged it furiously round her, in the air, as if pursuing imaginary foes. Her mouth foamed, and incoherent, wild exclamations broke from her lips, among which discordant sounds I discerned several times two familiar Christian names of men. The mesmerizer was so terrified that he lost all control over himself, and instead of withdrawing the fluid he loaded the girl with it still more.

"Take care," exclaimed I. "Stop! You will kill her, or she will kill you!"

But the Frenchman had unwittingly raised subtle potencies of Nature over which he had no control. Furiously turning round, the girl struck at him a blow which would have killed him had he not avoided it by jumping aside, receiving but a severe scratch on the right arm. The poor man was panic-stricken; climbing with an extraordinary agility, for a man of his bulky form, on the wall over her, he fixed himself on it astride, and gathering the remnants of his will power, sent in her direction a series of passes. At the second, the girl dropped the weapon and remained motionless.

"What are you about?" hoarsely shouted the mesmerizer in French, seated like some monstrous night-goblin on the wall. "Answer me, I command you!"

"I did . . . but what she . . . whom you ordered me to obey . . . commanded me to do," answered the girl in French, to my amazement.

"What did the old witch command you?" irreverently asked he.

"To find them . . . who murdered . . . kill them. . . I did so . . . and they are no more . . . Avenged! . . . Avenged! They are . . ."

An exclamation of triumph, a loud shout of infernal joy, rang loud in the air, and awakening the dogs of the neighbouring villages a responsive howl of barking began from that moment, like a ceaseless echo of the Gospoja's cry:

"I am avenged! I feel it; I know it. My warning heart tells me that the fiends are no more." She fell panting on the ground, dragging down, in her fall, the girl, who allowed herself to be pulled down as if she were a bag of wool.

"I hope my subject did no further mischief to-night. She is a dangerous as well as a very wonderful subject," said the Frenchman.

We parted. Three days after that I was at T——, and as I was sitting in the dining-room of a restaurant, waiting for my lunch, I happened to pick up a newspaper, and the first lines I read ran thus:

VIENNA, 186—. TWO MYSTERIOUS DEATHS.

Last evening, at 9.45, as P—— was about to retire, two of the gentlemen-in-waiting suddenly exhibited great terror, as though they had seen a dreadful apparition. They screamed, staggered, and ran about the room, holding up their hands as if to ward off the blows of an unseen weapon. They paid no attention to the eager questions of the prince and suite, but presently fell writhing upon the floor, and expired in great agony. Their bodies exhibited no appearance of apoplexy, nor any external marks of wounds, but, wonderful to relate, there were numerous dark spots and long marks upon the skin, as though they were stabs and slashes made without puncturing the cuticle. The autopsy revealed the fact that beneath each of these mysterious discolourations there was a deposit of coagulated blood. The greatest excitement prevails, and the faculty are unable to solve the mystery.

HADJI MORA.
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