

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, rendered in a light gray color, framing the central text.

BÃ©la Kiss

Bela Kiss

by William LeQueux

I

In the early spring of 1912 a tall rather elegant man of exquisite manner, thin-faced, black-haired, with high cheek-bones and a countenance of almost Tartar type, arrived with his young and pretty wife from Budapest at the charming little summer resort of Czinkota, a few miles from the Hungarian capital. The place is much frequented by holiday folk on Sundays, it being a centre for excursions to Visegrad, Nagy-Moros and Budafok. The stranger, who was about forty years of age, was named Bela Kiss, his wife being about fifteen years younger. After searching the district for a house he eventually took a rather spacious one standing back in a large garden on the Matyasfold road, in a somewhat isolated position, and for a few months lived happily there, going into Budapest alone about once or twice a week. It afterwards transpired that he had been a tinsmith in a large way of business, but had retired.

The pair formed few friendships, for Kiss seemed a somewhat mystical person, and had often been heard to discuss psychic subjects with his wife. He was also something of an amateur astrologer and possessed many books upon the subject, while his wife had a small crystal globe into which she was fond of gazing. The pair seemed a most devoted couple, and went about together in the small and rather dilapidated car which the husband possessed, and in which he often went into Budapest.

The wife was extremely good-looking, and Kiss was apparently extremely jealous of her. Indeed, he forbade her to make any male acquaintances. She was a native of Zimony, on the Danube, in the extreme South of Hungary, a place long noted for its handsome female inhabitants. According to village gossip, however, little Madame Kiss had a friend in a certain Paul Bihari, an artist of Budapest, who sometimes spent the day with her wandering in the acacia woods and picnicking together during her husband's absence. The handsome young fellow was well known in the capital and especially at the Otthon Club, where Hungarian authors, artists and journalists assembled nightly.

II

Matters proceeded in this manner for nearly six months, Paul being a frequent visitor to the house, and the pair making many excursions to the beauty spots in the vicinity. One evening, however Bela Kiss on his return from Budapest found the house locked up. After waiting till near nightfall he broke open the door, and found lying upon the dining-table, a note from his wife saying that she had fled with her lover, and asking forgiveness. In a frenzy of anger he burnt the note, and then rushing to a neighbour named Littman, who lived in the vicinity and who was one of the few persons with whom he had formed a friendship, told him of the staggering blow he had received.

Next day all Czinkota was agog, knowing what had occurred. But it was only what they had long expected.

Crushed by his disillusionment, the heart-broken husband shut himself up and became almost a recluse. He drove sometimes to Budapest, but he had no servant and did his own cooking and looked after his few daily wants himself. In fact, he became a woman-hater and devoted his time to the study of psychometry and mysticism. His eccentricity now became the more marked, but as months wore on his health appeared to be failing until it was noticed that he had not been seen out for over a week, while the house appeared to be closed. Yet each night there appeared a light in his bedroom.

The neighbour in whom he had confided how his wife had deserted him began to wonder, so one day he called. The knock on the door's brought Bela, pale, half-clad and very feeble.

He told his friend that he had been ill in bed for some days. The friend at once suggested that he should have somebody to nurse him, and that the village doctor should be called. At first Kiss demurred, saying: "After all, if I die what matters? I have nothing to live for, now that my dear one has left me!"

The neighbour uttered comforting words, and eventually the Doctor visited him — much against his will — and an old woman from the village, named Kalman, was left in charge.

His eccentricity had, it seems increased to a marked degree. In one room there

were laid out carefully upon the table the clothes and shoes that his wife had left behind, and into that room the invalid forbade the old woman to enter. For nearly three weeks the village woman was most assiduous, and carefully nursed him back to health, until at last he became quite well again. So he paid her and she left, leaving him to the dull, isolated life which he had lived ever since his young wife had gone.

III

Soon he resumed his business visits to Budapest, usually leaving the house in the afternoon and often not returning until midnight and after. Very naturally the woman Kalman was questioned by her friends as to the condition of the house of the poor grief-stricken man. It was also but natural that she should describe to her neighbours what she had seen — how, though forbidden to enter the room where the erring wife's clothes were displayed, she had entered it in secret while her patient was asleep, and passing through it had peered through the keyhole of the room beyond, where she saw five large tin drums ranged along by the wall.

The old woman's curiosity had been aroused by sight of these, and soon her friends, to whom she described what she had seen, suspected the eccentric, grief-stricken man to be in league with some illicit distillers who had their secret factory somewhere in the neighbourhood. The gossips were naturally sorely puzzled to account for those big receptacles for fluid. Some laughed and said that he had a big store of wine bought at the previous year's vintage. Littman, his neighbour and confidant, hearing about it, one day mentioned to him what the old woman Kalman had seen, whereupon Kiss laughed heartily and replied:

“Well, that is really amusing! They think I am one of those who distil alcohol against the law and sell it in secret to the night cafés in Budapest — eh? Well, let them think so! I would be afraid to engage in such a dangerous trade, lucrative as it is. No. The fact is that I have my store of petrol here. I bought it cheaply from a man who was about to be made bankrupt.”

Quickly the truth went round the village, and suspicion was at once allayed. Indeed, a man of such exemplary conduct as Bela Kiss surely could never be engaged in any illicit transactions.

Once Littman expressed surprise that he had not followed the runaway pair and divorced his wife. To this, Kiss replied: “If they are happy in Vienna, as I hear they are, why should I wreck her life? I loved her more than anything on earth. So that is enough. I was a fool! That's all!” And refused to discuss the matter further.

From that moment, however, suspicions regarding Kiss became increased. His many journeys to Budapest were regarded as mysterious, and an evil-tongued

woman who distrusted him declared that he practised black magic. He had drawn the horoscope of a woman of her acquaintance who believed in astrology, and thus a fresh theory was set up to account for his aloofness and eccentricity.

Whenever he motored to Budapest, as he did twice a week, it was noted that he never returned until early hours of the morning, when the whole village was asleep. The villagers heard his noisy, ramshackle car speeding through the streets homeward bound. Of money this retired tinsmith had plenty. The village policeman, who, by the way, had also had his curiosity aroused by the malicious gossip, struck up an acquaintance with, and soon discovered him to be real good fellow, kind, generous and hospitable. They often spent evenings together, for the representative of the law was, in addition to Littman, the only person he ever invited to cross his threshold since his wife's flight. The constable naturally reported the result of his inquiries to his chief, and all suspicions were set to rest.

IV

One wintry morning in January 1914, the exquisitely dressed Bela Kiss was seen walking with a pretty young woman, also handsomely attired in furs, about half a mile from the village and this fact, which soon got about, gave rise to the theory that the disillusioned husband had fallen in love again. The gossips kept watch, but only on that one occasion was the lady seen. It was, no doubt, an illicit meeting, for the well-dressed lady had, it was known, come from Budapest and had spent the day with her admirer.

About a month later a farmer driving from Czinkota to Rakosfalva noticed a man and a woman walking in the afternoon along a secluded footpath on the edge of a wood, and on approaching recognised Kiss arm in arm with a well-dressed young girl, to whom he was earnestly talking. The spot was nearly four miles from the village, and near by stood Kiss's old motor-car, muddy and unwashed.

Just about that time a strange story was told to the police of the Josefvaros quarter in Budapest by a young girl named Luisa Ruszt, daughter of a well-known draper in the Karoly Korut, one of the principal shopping thoroughfares.

She said that one evening she had met a man in the Somossy variety theatre, and he had taken her next day for a long motor drive. On their way back to Budapest, they had stopped at his country house and there had some refreshment. Afterwards they returned to the city, when he invited her to his flat somewhere near the Margaret Bridge. They had dinner at a restaurant, when he told her that if she cared to go back to his flat he would tell her fortune. Like most girls she was eager to know her future, therefore she consented and went.

On arrival he offered her some pale yellow liqueur which seemed very strong, and then setting her at a table he told her to gaze intently into a small crystal globe. In fun he promised that she would see her future husband.

She did as he instructed, and had been gazing intently for some time when she began to experience a strange dizziness, probably due to the liqueur. Suddenly, on looking up from the crystal she saw in a mirror at her side the man standing behind her with a piece of green silk cord in his hand. It had a noose and a slip-knot, and he was about to place it over her head!

Sight of the changed face of her friend — a pale, evil countenance, with glaring dark eyes which had in them the spirit of murder — held her breathless. She fainted, and knew no more until she found herself lying beneath the trees in the Ersebet Park at dawn with all her jewellery and money gone.

She described to the police, as well as she could, the man with his house in the country and his flat in the town, but, though some inquiries were made, neither flat nor house could be identified, and they apparently dismissed the story as the imaginings of a romantic girl.

Curiously enough, however, about three weeks later a very similar story was told by a young married woman of good family, and whose husband was a wealthy merchant, to the police of the Belvaros quarter of Budapest. The lady, who lived on the handsome Franz Josef's Quai, facing the Danube, had met a smartly dressed man one Sunday morning as she came out alone after service in the Terezvaros Church, which was highly fashionable during the Budapest season. She was nearly run down by a passing taxi when he had grabbed her arm and pulled her back. Thus they became acquainted. They walked together for some distance, when he told her that his name was Franz Hofmann, a jeweller's traveller, and that he was greatly interested in spiritualism. She happened to be also interested in spiritualism, hence a friendship was formed. Her husband was away in Paris, therefore she invited him to dine at her house a few days later, and at the dinner she appeared wearing some valuable jewellery, while he, as a jeweller, admired it greatly.

Later that evening Hofmann invited her to go to one of the most select night cafés for which Budapest is famous, and she accepted. Afterwards, at two o'clock in the morning, he persuaded her to accompany him to his flat, where he would tell her fortune by the crystal. She went, and almost the same thing happened. She drank the liqueur, and he tried to strangle her. She fought with him, was overpowered, and when she came to her senses found herself in the hands of the police devoid of her jewellery. She had been found lying in a doorway unconscious. This second story aroused the interest of the Budapest police, and inquiries were made, but neither woman could say where the flat in question was situated. They had been taken there, they said, by a roundabout route. The taxi had been dismissed at what seemed to be a cul-de-sac, and they had walked the remainder of the distance. They both described the interior in identical terms and their description of the man left no doubt at it was the same individual in each case.

Then, when a third girl told a similar story a fortnight later, and when a dealer in second-hand jewellery had shown the police a ring the description of which had been circulated, a real hue and cry was raised. But just at that moment war broke out and the country was thrown into disorder. The police system quickly broke down, and every available man as called up to fight against the Allies on the side of the Germans.

Bela Kiss was among those called up. He had been living a quiet, lonely, uneventful life, and as soon as the call to arms came he ordered from a blacksmith a number of iron bars, which he fixed inside the windows of his house to keep out thieves during his absence. Then, a week later, he left Czinkota and joined the colours.

V

Eighteen months passed. He fought in Serbia, and once wrote his friend Littman from Semendria, on the Serbian shore the Danube, after a great battle had been fought. Littman, who was over military age, replied but the letter was returned some four months later with an official intimation that Kiss had died of wounds in a military hospital near Belgrade. Then the village gossips of Czinkota knew that the poor deserted husband, who had led such a lonely life, had given his life for his country, and his name was later on engraved upon the local war memorial.

In the meantime, however, a sensational discovery had been made, quite by accident, of the body of a young woman in an advanced state of decomposition buried under about six inches of earth in the same wood of acacias wherein the farmer had seen Bela Kiss walking with a young woman. Upon the finger of the corpse was a wedding-ring engraved on the inside by which she was identified with the young wife of a furrier in a large way of business in Vienna, who had before the war run away with a middle-aged man, taking with her a quantity of jewellery and the equivalent of two thousand pounds in money. She had left her husband and entirely disappeared, after sending a letter to a friend from Budapest.

Inquiries were at once instituted, of course, and it was found that her husband had been killed within the first week of the war. Therefore, as far as the police — unfortunately a very inefficient service in those days — were concerned, they could do no more. But within three months yet another body was turned up by the plough in the vicinity. The records of missing persons were inspected, and they found that the unfortunate woman was named Isabelle Koblitz, a niece of the Minister of Commerce, who was known to have studied spiritualism, and who had disappeared from Vienna in July 1913.

The chief of the detective police of Budapest then began further inquiries. From Berne a report came that a wealthy Swiss lady named Riniker, living at Lausanne, had been staying at a well-known hotel in Budapest, from which she had written to her sister in Geneva, but had, in October 1913, mysteriously disappeared. A description was given of her, together with the fact that she had a red scar upon her cheek and that she had a slight deformation of the left leg. Within three days the Hungarian police established the fact that the body of the

lady was that which had, six months before, been found in a disused well at Solymar, a little place about twenty miles away, at which the festival of the Queen of the Roses is celebrated each year.

The police now became much puzzled. Yet they did not connect the stories of the women who had gazed into the crystal with the discovery of the bodies of others.

Suddenly an order to commandeer all petrol went forth, and all garages and private persons were compelled to deliver it over for military purposes and receive receipts for it, which the Government eventually paid. At first the commandeering took place only in the big towns, but after three months a further thorough “comb-out” of petrol was ordered, and commissioners visited every village, including Czinkota. There they searched for petrol, whereupon the old woman Kalman recalled the fact that poor Kiss who had died possessed quite a stock of petrol. This quickly reached the ears of the commissioner, who went at once to the dead man’s house, broke down the iron bars, and found the big drums of spirit. From their appearance both the commissioner and a constable suspected them to be full of smuggled brandy. Indeed, the constable obtained a tin mug from the kitchen in order to sample the spirit when they bored a hole. They did so — and found it to be crude alcohol.

Further investigation, however, led to a most ghastly discovery. On cutting open the top of the big drum a quantity of male clothing was seen. This was removed, and beneath was the nude body of a woman bound with cord and so well preserved in the spirit that her features were easily recognisable. Indeed, around her neck was a thin red line, showing plainly the manner in which she had been murdered namely, by strangulation with a cord and slip-knot!

And each of the other drums contained the body of a woman, each showing traces of strangulation. Upon these gruesome facts — perhaps the most horrible discovery ever made in the annals of the police of Europe — we need not dwell.

Search of Bela Kiss’s belongings brought to light a number of receipts for advertisements inserted in several of the most important newspapers in Vienna and Budapest, and upon examination of the files of those papers the advertisements in question were easily identified.

One, which was repeated in ten different issues of the paper, read:

Bachelor: aged 40: lonely; good income from commercial enterprises

averaging ₦3000 per annum, is desirous of corresponding with educated lady with a view to matrimony. Address: De Koller, Poste Restante, Granatos, Budapest.

A number of other similar advertisements were traced by the receipts, all of which were either alluding to matrimony or trying to induce girls to learn their future. Indeed, when the police came to inquire at the Post Office in Budapest they found no fewer than fifty-three letters awaiting the mysterious De Koller undelivered!

In a Vienna daily newspaper the following advertisement was found: “Know Yourself! — Those who wish to know their future and thus frame their lives should consult Professor Hofmann of Budapest. Write: Poste Restante, Vienna.” To this one advertisement there were twenty-three replies awaiting him, all from women eager to have their fortunes told. It then became plain that the fellow’s habit was to lure women possessing even paltry sums of money or modest jewellery, either to his flat in Budapest, or to take them out by night to his house at Czinkota, and there strangle them. The tin drums of spirit he evidently used in order to preserve the bodies of his victims until he could bury them in secret or otherwise dispose of them.

A number of prisoners of war were at once set to work digging in Kiss’s garden and in the acacia woods, the result being that no fewer than twenty-six other bodies of women and girls were found at various spots. Over one hundred and sixty pawn-tickets relating to women’s clothing were found concealed under the carpet of the dining-room, and by the recovery of the clothing and some jewellery, fourteen of his victims were eventually identified. They were mostly of women of the better class, and in every case had worn jewellery, and had money in their possession when they had gone to consult him.

The method he adopted never varied. His first crime was committed by means of a cord slipped over the head and drawn tight ere his victims could utter a cry — thus adopting the method of the notorious Frenchwoman Gabrielle Bompard — and so successful was he that he always pursued the same course. Among the bodies recovered in the garden was one which was identified as the young wife who was supposed to have fled with the artist, Paul Bihari. The latter was found in Agram, and when questioned by the police stated that one day, while at the house in Czinkota, Kiss came home unexpectedly, and after a fracas he left and had not seen the lady or heard of her since.

The monster Bela Kiss had, however, died of wounds received while fighting in Serbia, therefore the police hushed up the terrible affair, and soon the gruesome discovery was forgotten by all except the villagers of Czinkota.

About a year later, however, Inspector Resch, of the detective force of Budapest, learned that a man closely resembling Franz Hofmann had been seen a week before by the girl Luisa Ruszt — who had had such a narrow escape while gazing into the crystal globe. At first he was not inclined to believe her, but so positive was she that she had actually seen him in the flesh, that the police officer decided to go to hospital at Belgrade and learn details at first hand of the assassin's death.

On arrival he found that Bela Kiss had died from wounds, and he was given the dead man's papers, which proved his identity beyond question. By mere chance the nurse who had tended him in his dying moments was still there, and naturally the inspector questioned her as to the end of such a callous and elusive criminal.

"But surely," she remarked, "such a very frank and pious-minded boy could not have committed such awful crimes!"

"Boy!" echoed the inspector. "What do you mean? Bela Kiss was over forty years old."

"Well, the Bela Kiss who died here was about twenty!" was her reply.

Again the surprised detective examined the identification papers, and saw that without doubt they were the genuine ones belonging to Bela Kiss of Czinkota. Hence the assassin had, no doubt, exchanged papers with the poor young fellow who had died and been buried under his name.

With this astounding knowledge Inspector Resch sped back to Budapest, and a thorough search was at once made for the assassin. The police of Europe were warned, and as it was believed that the assassin had fled to London, Scotland Yard became active, as well as the Paris Sûreté. But the fellow managed to slip through their fingers.