

The Picture

By Amyas Northcote

A superstition still exists in a certain part of Hungary that if a girl on New Year's Eve, after the performance of some simple ceremonies, looks into a darkened looking-glass, she will see reflected in it the face of her future husband, provided always that matrimony is destined to be her fate during the ensuing twelve months.

On a certain New Year's Eve not so very many years ago a group of village girls, who had assembled at the house of the farmer Ivan in company with their elders to welcome the New Year, were indulging in this ceremony amid peals of laughter and with apparently varying success. Amongst them was one Anna Pavlinski; when it came to her turn and she had looked in the glass she uttered a slight exclamation and laid the mirror down in some haste. No questioning by her companions elicited any information, but after the party had broken up she confided to her grandmother that she had distinctly seen the face of a man in the glass whom she did not know, but of whom she gave a very clear description. When she had finished her grandmother sat for a short time in silence and then said:

"I do not understand it, Anna, but I charge you most earnestly to forget what you have seen. You have described clearly a man whom I have known; it was many years ago and if he is indeed still alive he must be absolutely different now from this vision you have seen. But I believe him to be dead and that his evil soul is where he can no longer work mischief. Never speak or think of him again. No good can come of it."

Whether Anna followed the advice of her grandmother in every respect is not known, but at any rate she never spoke again of her vision.

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It is now necessary to introduce the characters of the story, and I begin with the heroine, Anna Pavlinski, the eighteen-year-old daughter of the bailiff of the W. property in Hungary. Her grandfather had been a man who by his own talents had raised himself to a position superior to that of the majority of the peasantry, and at the time of his death had been what corresponds in England to the foreman carpenter on the estate of the Counts of W. in 1848 when, as is well known, there were revolutionary disturbances in various parts of Hungary, he had been the leader of a mob which had attacked the castle of W.

The object of the mob had been somewhat indefinite, but it had shown a desire to get hold of and probably to kill the then Count W. This gentleman, however, had not been found in the castle and the mob had dispersed without doing serious harm. In fact, except for a looting of the wine-cellars and the chasing away of a few Austrian servants who formed the Count's household and who fled the neighbourhood in fear of their lives, no harm was done. After the troubles, which were not serious in this part of the country, for some reason this Pavlinska was not arrested and found himself left undisturbed in his position of foreman carpenter.

About four years after the rising Pavlinski was at work one day executing repairs to the roof of the castle when, according to the testimony of a fellow workman, he suddenly threw up his arm, as if to ward off a blow, uttered an unintelligible cry and staggering backwards fell into the courtyard below, where he was picked up with a broken neck. At the time of his death Pavlinska

was married and had one child, a son to whom he had given a good education and, as he was endowed with some natural abilities, the young man gradually rose to a position equivalent to that of estate bailiff.

Some years after his father's death, the younger Pavlinski returned one day from a tour of the property and, having dismounted, was standing by his horse in the courtyard of the castle, when the animal suddenly became terrified and lashing out kicked his master on the head, causing instant death. It was noticed at the time that the horse became tranquil again after the tragedy as suddenly as it had become excited. Pavlinski the younger had also married and at the time of his death was a widower with one daughter, Anna, a girl of about fifteen years of age, whose mother had died at the time of her birth. She and her grandmother were, therefore, the only surviving members of the Pavlinski family and, being left in poor circumstances, they took up their abode with a distant relative of the elder woman, a well-to-do farmer named Ivan. Under his roof Anna lived up to the age of eighteen, making herself useful to her host and hostess and receiving, through the care of her grandmother, a slightly superior education to most of the village girls. She developed into a good-looking lass of a rather reserved and dreamy temperament, full of imagination and was not especially popular with the young people of the village since they felt that she was in a sense aloof from and different to themselves.

Count W.'s castle, the scene of the tragic events connected with the Pavlinski family, was a large and handsome building standing on a slight eminence to the west of the village. The entrance hall and other parts of the castle situated on its eastern side were of great antiquity and looked down on to it from, a distance of about half a mile; the western part of the castle was of more modern construction and commanded an extensive view of the Hungarian plain.

In 1848 the direct line of the W. family had dwindled down to one representative, who was popularly known locally as "the wicked Count." His reputation, however, was largely one of hearsay as far as the village was concerned and was founded chiefly on the fact that, contrary to Hungarian traditions, he had embraced in his youth the side of the Austrian Government, had gone to Vienna and had there joined the Imperial Guard. After some years' service in the Austrian Army he had retired, and after a further stay in the metropolis had returned to W. where he lived a quiet life attended exclusively by imported Austrian servants.

His means were scanty, as the estate was much decayed and it was by no means clear whence he derived income sufficient to maintain himself at all. He was addicted to sudden and secret comings and goings and popular rumour ascribed to him the part of an Austrian secret agent, hence his local sobriquet.

In appearance Count W. was a tall, handsome man with curly dark hair, black eyes and in 1848 was about forty-five years old. At the time of the *émeute* previously described he was residing at the castle, and it was greatly to the astonishment of the mob that he was not found therein, but presumably he had had warning of their coming and had escaped. What was even more singular was that he never reappeared. After that autumn afternoon in 1848 he vanished completely and some years later, his death being presumed, the estate passed to a distant relative then living in America. This gentleman did not care to leave his American interests in order to take possession of a practically bankrupt estate and accordingly selected a firm of agents in Budapest to take charge of his affairs, closed up the castle and caused caretakers to be established therein, pending the date when he might wish actually to reside in his Hungarian home. Such was the position of the castle of W. at the date of the opening of the story.

Two or three months had elapsed since the scene first described when one day old Michael, the custodian of the castle, hobbled down to Ivan's home, which stood at the entrance to the village,

in considerable distress. He himself had long been crippled with rheumatism and the bulk of the work at the castle had been performed by his old wife. He now came to explain that she had fallen down and injured her hip and that he was anxious to obtain the help of one of the village girls to look after his wife and to do what was necessary at the castle.

After some talk it was arranged that Anna should go to the help of Michael and his wife, and it was not long before she found herself installed in her new work. At first it was expected that the old woman would soon recover; but she did not do so, and Anna quickly became so indispensable that at the next visit of the Budapest agent Michael pleaded for her permanent appointment. This was arranged without undue difficulty.

Anna now became a regular resident of the castle and found plenty to occupy her in looking after the old couple and in doing a certain amount of airing and cleaning in its closed up rooms. She also began for the first time to keep a diary of her daily life, and it is upon this diary that we depend for the next portion of the story.

Matters appear to have gone on quite uneventfully until midsummer, when on the eve of the Feast of St. John Anna found herself engaged in cleaning in the West Gallery, a long and noble apartment in the newer part of the castle. She had actually finished her day's work and before going downstairs was standing by the last open window leaning against the framework and gazing dreamily out over the low Hungarian plain toward the setting sun. All was absolutely still, no air was stirring and the only sounds audible were the noises of a distant farmyard. She was about to close the window and leave the gallery, when she was startled by hearing a low sigh behind her followed by a gentle rustle. She turned hastily, to see nothing to account for the sigh, but the rustle was easily explained by the slipping off of the covering of one of the pictures behind her. The rays of the setting sun shone full upon it and showed it to be the portrait of a tall, dark, handsome man of about forty years of age, clothed in the fashion of some thirty-five years previously.

In an instant Anna recognized the picture as being that of the visionary being she had seen in the looking glass, of which the memory had never left her. Wrapped in astonishment, Anna moved nearer the picture and saw by the legend on the frame that it was the portrait of the so-called "wicked Count W." who had vanished mysteriously so many years ago. She gazed fixedly at the picture and as the declining beams of the sun shed their last glory upon it, it seemed to her that human intelligence showed itself in its painted lines; the features seemed to become endued with life and to smile upon her. As she stood before it an awful sense of an unfolding mystery took possession of her, she was filled with joy, joy at the manifestation vouchsafed to her; she was filled with fear, fear of the uncanny, of the unknown future that was spreading itself before her. At that moment she heard Michael's voice calling from below and, hastily shutting the window, she ran downstairs. Neither then nor at any subsequent time did she speak of her experience either to Michael or to her grandmother, nor did she follow her general household instructions and replace the covering on the picture, which gradually came to exercise an extraordinary fascination upon her. It became her habit to spend long hours gazing at and, as she imagined, communing with it, in fact her diary is filled to a large extent with her accounts of mystic correspondence with her painted lover, for into such she gradually transformed the picture.

Time went on until one afternoon in September when old Michael once more came down to Ivan's home in as great trouble as before, this time to report the disappearance of Anna. It appeared from his story that her work that day had consisted in cleaning out a room known as the Countess' boudoir, which adjoined the West Gallery. The last time she had been seen was at

about half-past three, when she had come downstairs in search of some article needed for her work. She was then in her usual health and spirits and, having found what she sought, had returned to her work. She usually came down to the lower floor, where she and the caretakers lived, at five to attend to various small duties, and since at half-past five o'clock she had not appeared Michael had called to her and receiving no reply had gone upstairs to seek for her. He found the Countess' boudoir littered with Anna's household implements but no trace of the girl, for whom he consequently made search elsewhere.

In the course of this search he discovered the uncovered picture of the wicked Count and an open window in the West Gallery, but of Anna he could see and hear nothing. Although his wife was positive that Anna had not gone out, he decided ultimately to go down to Ivan's home, partly in the faint hope of finding her there and partly to give the alarm and obtain help for a further and more thorough investigation of the castle. Ivan and one of his sons accordingly returned there with the old man, but despite a careful search in all parts of the building they could find nothing to indicate what had become of Anna. The following day another search party, headed by the village priest, made an even more careful exploration of the castle and its surroundings, but with like result. Anna had vanished as mysteriously as the Count and, like him, she never reappeared. The affair created a village sensation but was forgotten, save by a few, after the lapse of some years.

Some eight years after the disappearance of Anna the then owner of the property wrote to his Budapest agents that, having made a fortune sufficient for his needs, he intended to leave America and take up his abode at W. He gave instructions that the castle should be put in repair and modern conveniences installed.

A firm of Budapest builders was employed for the purpose, and in the course of their work the following curious discoveries were made. In the eastern or older part of the castle was situated the great entrance hall panelled with magnificent old oak. It was necessary to remove part of this panelling temporarily, and the workmen engaged on the task discovered close to the entrance to the castle a movable panel in the woodwork, which formed the outside of a strong secret door. This door opened on to a short passage leading into a tiny but lofty room lighted and aired by a narrow slit in the stonework above the main entrance. In this room were a chair and a small table, and seated at the table, with its arm resting on a bundle of papers, was a skeleton which by the remains of the dress was easily identifiable as that of the missing Count. The papers proved that he had been in the secret employ of the Austrian police, and it seems clear that on learning of the approach of the mob he had fled for safety to this hiding-place, taking the papers with him. It was noted, however, that the spring opening the door from within was broken, and it was therefore evident that once the Count had entered the passage and closed the door he was a prisoner.

Whether he knew that the lock was hampered, and relied on being able to summon aid by calling his servants after the mob had gone, or whether he himself broke the spring in attempting to open the door cannot now be known, but it will be remembered that the mob drove the servants away from the castle, which remained absolutely deserted for a period more than long enough to cause the Count's death by starvation. He had evidently met his fate with resignation and had died in his chair with his arm on his papers. *His* fate forms no great mystery, but the discovery of a second skeleton in the little room gives rise to a more interesting problem. For, crouching at the foot of the Count in a kneeling position and in an attitude of adoration, was found the skeleton of a girl which it was not difficult to identify as that of the lost Anna.

The problem to solve is: how did she reach the place where she was found, why was she found in that attitude, and why did she not permit herself to be rescued by the searchers?

At the time of the discovery Anna's grandmother, Michael and his wife were all dead, but the priest and Ivan were both alive and narrated the happenings of that September afternoon to the Budapest agent who, summoned in haste, came to W. and saw the bodies in the position in which they were found.

It was clear that at half-past three on the afternoon of her disappearance Anna was in good health and spirits. Her diary showed that up to the night before she had been ignorant of the existence of the secret room; it is impossible that she should have known it and of its contents and should not have mentioned them in her diary. As she did not come down to the kitchen at five o'clock it must be assumed that at some time between half-past three and five o'clock something occurred which caused her to leave her work in one part of the castle, go to another part, discover a secret room and voluntarily shut herself up in it—it was proved that the door of the secret passage was not self-closing.

And having entered the secret room why did she kneel down and adore a skeleton? Most people, young girls especially, on finding themselves in such company would have done their best to escape from it; again, why did she not make her presence in the secret room known to one or other of the search parties? it is unlikely that she died so quickly as not to have heard either Michael or later on the first search party calling in the East Hall, though it is possible she may have succumbed before the advent of the priest's party on the following day. The questions, as my friend, the Budapest agent, said, are easy enough to put but impossible to answer unless one is willing to believe that the wicked Count, driven to his terrible death by the mob headed by Pavlinski, continued after leaving his earthly body to pursue Pavlinski and his family with his vengeance. The seemingly accidental and violent deaths within the walls of the castle of the two male members of the family may perhaps be thus explained, as well as the singular illusions which lured to her end the unfortunate Anna, the last of her race.