

The Insatiable Russian Countess

The celebration of court suites against the cosmopolitan and pleasure-loving resident Russian aristocracy of Venice began long before 1917, the year of the October Revolution. They were held in the Hall of the Rialto Court of Assizes. Between March and May of 1910, in fact, the lagoon law-court was the setting for one of the most sensational trials of the turn of the century: that of Maria Tarnowska, the Russian countess, baptized by the daily newspapers as "insatiable and voracious", "Circe" and "femme-vampire", as in the headlines of the French newspaper *Le Matin*.

A truly mundane occasion for the Countess who had her wardrobe made to order and sent to her directly from Paris, right under the noses of the flabbergasted nuns of the Giudecca prison where she lived in a privately paid cell, as was the custom in those days. She was capable of enchanting men and setting them one against the other to the point of having eight of them, before the trial, blow their brains out (though not before having drained their bank accounts).

The event that had brought her to prison was complicated: with the help of her momentary companion she had incited one of her young lovers to kill another, an elderly nobleman, who had named her as beneficiary of a particularly generous life insurance policy.



Born in Kiev in 1877, Maria Nikolajevna Tereskpowa O'Rurke (the family was of Irish extraction) already demonstrated all her "ability" with men at a very early age: at sixteen she stole the fiancé - a boring but very wealthy count - from her elder sister, whom she then, in turn, left to run away with Vassilij Tarnowski, aristocrat, Czarist officer, who took her virginity raping her on the set dining-room table of a brothel, to the accompaniment of a gypsy band.

Five years later, tired of her husband's continuous infidelities, she netted another officer, Alexis Bozewski, who received a bullet in the head from Tarnowski, who shot him for his betrayal after a cordial dinner for three.

While her husband was being arrested, Maria left with the injured man and set out to travel around Europe on a quest for the best cures: it was in Vienna that the couple ran into Dr. Vladimir Stahel, a morphine addict who had been expelled from the medical register.

It was a ominous case of morbid passion at first sight: the two, under the influence of the drug, consumed their relationship without the least heed for the dying man who, shocked as he was, until one day in the attempt to heave himself up from the bed, breaking open his bandages in the process, finishes by falling to the floor, dead. Neglected and abandoned immediately thereafter, the doctor took his own life. It was at this time that Maria's existence underwent a change made up of sado-masochistic orgies, excessive drug abuse and the dissipation of the fortunes of the men she subjected to the influence of her power.

Perversions that were evidently also to the taste of the ambiguous lawyer Donat Prilukov, whom she had encountered during the legal proceedings regarding the separation from her husband. He abandoned his wife, children and career for her. Another appraiser of those kinds of cruel "games" was the extremely wealthy Pavel Kamarowskij, who declared himself willing to marry Maria.



Pavel Kamarowskij

Under the able guidance of Prilukov, the elderly Count deposited ten thousand rubles in exchange for the mere promise of engagement. The party given for the announcement was in August 1907, in a sumptuous reception hall of the Hotel Des Bains on the Lido;

Kamarowskij had meanwhile prepared their love nest in a palace near San Marco. The naïve Count had also stipulated a life insurance policy valid even in the case of violent death. Sole beneficiary: Maria Tarnowska.

During these same days the woman was frequently seen in the company of a young, penniless reporter, Nikolai Naumov, who was very much in love with her. She convinced him - with the help of the lawyer - that the wedding was nothing more to her than an "extortion" of the old Count. Sent away by Maria with the noble excuse of the engagement to Kamarowskij, the woman reached the young man with a message at the border, while he was on his way Russia: "Return". The young man didn't make her send another. He let himself be persuaded into killing the Count after Maria showed him a forged note, signed by Kamarowskij, in which she was described as a "tart", and Naumov himself as a "traitor".

Received at the palace on the morning of September the 4th, 1908, the young man fired his pistol four times at the Count who, in a terrified state of shock, collapsed to the floor incredulously asking his assassin "Why?", who responded coolly: "Because I do not wish you to marry Maria".

The woman was, cunningly enough, away on a trip to Vienna, with the aim of creating herself an alibi. Kamarowskij died in hospital four days later, up to his last breath, imploring the woman's presence at his side, in vain. Young Naumov, arrested in Verona, realised the intrigue into which he had fallen and supplied the authorities with the names of his instigators.

Nikolai Naumov(center)



The trial was held under the watchful eyes of thousands of people, especially from the lower class, who congregated every day to follow the dismemberment of the celebrated man-eater who, here and there, even deigned herself to give them a glance of acknowledgement. Among the public in the courtroom, intently studying the movements and carriage of the Circe, were two young actresses from the local theatre, Emma Grammatica and Gabrielle Réjan, who would shortly afterwards contend for the favours of the Italians and the French to the disadvantage of Eleonora Duse and Sarah Bernhardt. The Carabinieri of the escort party were changed every day, to avoid the dangers of them falling under the charming allures of Madame Tarnowska and thereby possibly enabling her to escape.

Theatrical as always, in the course of the trial Maria convinced the public attorney to accompany her to the cemetery on the island of San Michele, to place flowers on the grave of the unfortunate Kamarowskij. The judge handed down a sentence of ten years in prison for Prilukov, eight and a half for the Countess and two and a half for Naumov, who was declared mentally infirm. Far from being delivered from the spiral of sensuality with which Tarnowska had enthralled him, the young killer approached the prisoner's cage, after having heard of his own fate, to kiss the woman's hands.

The reporter died from tuberculosis a couple of years after being released from prison; Prilukov, who attempted suicide in prison, disappeared without leaving any trace after serving his time. Released in 1915 for good behaviour, Maria Tarnowska moved to Paris together with the children from her first and only marriage, and emigrated to Argentina after marrying an American official. She died in poverty in Santa Fe in 1949. She was sixty-one years old...

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