

The Iron Star.

BY FRANK L. POLLOCK.



HAT puzzled the King of Servia and all the royal household was how the loss of the Iron Star became so quickly known. Known it was, as the roaring mobs in the streets of Belgrade and before the palace testified. In fact, excitement ran so high that at one time it seemed probable that the reigning dynasty would be overturned, an event which would have muddled the affairs of Eastern Europe beyond comprehension, and probably opened a way for the Great War.

All have heard of the famous Iron Star of Servia; most have met some rumor of its strange adventures; some may have seen it among the Crown jewels, previous to its disappearance; but few know the secret history of its romantic connection with Count Gorgei and the Princess. As much of the story as could be gathered I have here set down, and I have taken the sole precaution—two royal families being concerned—to alter certain names; but for those who have read the newspapers of that year this disguise will be easily pierced.

The Iron Star itself was a rude, six-pointed star of black iron, smooth with age, set with jewels, and said to contain iron from one of the nails used in the Crucifixion. For nearly eight hundred years it has been deemed indispensable in the marriages of members of the royal family, the bride and groom laying hands on the Star during the ceremony. In fact, without this rite the sacrament would scarce be considered valid. A host of superstitions center round the relic, and by the simple peasantry it is—or, at least, was—revered as the very amulet, the palladium of the kingdom.

There was to be use for the Star in the early eighties. The Princess Aline was to marry Prince Anton, of Bulgaria. The Prince had come to Belgrade, the streets, palaces, and cathedral

were decorated, and all was arranged, when, only thirty hours before the time appointed for the ceremony, the Iron Star was sought and reported missing. Everything was cut short. The wedding was postponed. The bridegroom was in despair. The King was in a fury, and threatened death if the news was allowed to pass beyond the palace gates.

A vigorous search was at once instituted, and every one about the palace had to submit to a personal examination. The government detectives were notified, and Count Gorgei, a cousin of the Princess, offered to run down to Salonika and keep an eye on the seaport. This was considered very magnanimous of him, for there were stories of a romantic attachment between the cousins, and it was certain that the Count had violently opposed the marriage, which was purely one of statecraft.

But to the dismay of the palace, the people seemed to learn of the affair with infernal rapidity. The Star was missed in the morning, and at noon the word was in everybody's mouth. The Bulgarian marriage had never been over-popular in the capital, and this disaster seemed to the Belgradians to stamp it as ill-omened and accursed. To have attempted to carry through the marriage without the Star would have been to provoke a revolution. Later in the day a rumor spread, flying with incredible rapidity, that it was proposed to forge an imitation star, and this was sufficient to raise the excitable Servians into howling mobs that packed the streets and clamored at the palace gates.

Curiously enough, no one seemed to think of connecting the Princess Aline with this series of inexplicable events, though her personal distaste to the marriage was not unknown. Yet it was observed by her domestics that she betrayed no alarm at the commotion that seethed through the city, nor did she seem surprised that the citizens should appear as well informed on the case as herself. It might have been noticed, also, that Count Gorgei presently ceased to report by wire from Salonika, and leaving his hotel, sailed away over the Aegean in a new steam yacht that had been lying in the harbor for ten days.

The wretched King of Servia was in a quandary. The mind of his people had made a dead set against the marriage. The Prince of Bulgaria was inclined to suspect him of bad faith, and

began to assume an air of haughtiness and offended pride. The monarch, almost out of his wits with perplexity, organized a grand ball for the Court, and a *fête* for the people, and redoubled his efforts to discover the relic. But all these maneuvers failed either to quiet the excitement or to discover the Star, and matters drifted from bad to worse.

It may as well be said right here that Count Gorgei had the Iron Star. Report had not lied when it spoke of an attachment between him and his cousin, the Princess. The two had been lovers almost from childhood, so far as court etiquette permitted or could be evaded, and it was from the Count that the Princess obtained assistance when she found herself being drawn into a hateful political marriage. It was her wit that had planned the secreting of the Star, and the sending of emissaries among the people to stir them up with the news. The Count had taken the relic on board the yacht, and the intention was to keep it out of the way until the marriage should be declared off, and then to return it as mysteriously as it had gone. But all this plan of action was entirely changed by a moment's indiscretion on the part of the Count.

The yacht was off Rhodes, steaming slowly southwards, and her owner was smoking in the saloon. The Iron Star was in his inner pocket, for it never left his person. But from time to time his fever of anxiety concerning it would give him no peace until he had drawn it out, looked at it, felt of it, made sure that it was still in his possession. It was during one of these intervals of contemplation that he sat regarding so intently this rude relic, around which centered so many of his hopes, that he did not hear the door open, nor see the steward softly enter the cabin. When finally awakened to the presence of another, Count Gorgei hastily slipped the Star under his coat, cursing himself for his folly, and hoping that it had escaped the man's notice. The steward made no sign, and went about his business, but the mischief was done, and in half an hour everybody on board knew that the famous Servian relic was among them.

Now the crew were not Servians with whom the secret might have been safe, but Levantines and Greeks, who would have sold their birthrights, if they had ever had any, for a gill of brandy.

They had heard some rumor of the missing treasure before leaving port, and were well aware of its value. Thus they came to the not unnatural conclusion that in the Count they had a daring adventurer, what the newspapers call "a Napoleon of crime," who would endeavor to extort a huge ransom for the Star. The obvious reasoning from this was that they should share the spoil, and next morning the whole ship's company, from the captain down, confronted the Count with their discovery and their demands.

Half the booty was what they wanted, and very reasonable they thought themselves. It was in vain for the Count to protest that there was to be no hint of plunder in the whole affair. The crew differed from him; knives were drawn and pistols shown, and the Count was overargued. The captain of the yacht was a rascally Cretan with a considerable amount of criminal cunning, and he arranged the details. The Count should write a letter to the Servian Government demanding money — much money — for the return of the Star. The Count objected strenuously to doing this, but his life was at stake, and again he was overargued. The outlines of the required letter were explained to him, and he wrote it, and addressed it to the Minister of War. It read as follows: —

The Iron Star of Servia will be restored to the King, at the Island of Laxos, on June 12 of this year.

Not more than five men must be present to receive it, and no Government vessel must lie within signal during the negotiations.

Count Gorgei, of Saska, will be present to vouch for the genuineness of the Star, and in case these conditions are not adhered to, he will be put to death, and the Star sunk in the sea.

The sum of three million francs in gold will be demanded upon delivery of the Star.

A week later this missive was received by the Minister of War, who made haste to call a special cabinet meeting. Aroused to a fever of anxiety, the ministry at once determined to recover the Star at all hazards. To the suggestion of those friendly to the Count that plans be laid for his rescue, the majority opposed the disastrous revelations almost sure to follow the return of Count Gorgei. Besides, as they pointed out, any deviation from the terms of the letter would mean the loss of the Star as well as the death of the Count. So officially that nobleman was aban-

done. That secretly his friends still worked in his behalf may be inferred from later developments.

Three million francs is a great sum for little Serbia to raise, but the Star had to be recovered if it bankrupted the kingdom. The Jews of Belgrade reaped a rich harvest, and national securities fell so alarmingly that the European press began to scent Russian designs on Constantinople, and a panic was very nearly created in Ottoman Bonds. By herculean efforts the State financiers managed to get the required sum together without the strait becoming publicly known, and engaged a Bulgarian warship to cruise in the neighborhood of Laxos — but out of sight — as a safeguard against treachery. And on the twelfth of June, at ten o'clock, this cruiser disembarked the iron-bound chest, in charge of five Servian officers, armed with concealed weapons.

Now Laxos is a mere irregular lump of rock with a precipitous and rocky coast, sloping down to a bit of beach and a little cove at the south, where the money was landed. This little bay is protected by a rocky islet at its mouth, designed to cut off impertinent observation. Here the Servians waited till, about mid-day, a yacht hove in sight to the southwest.

She steamed up to within two hundred yards of the island, and lowered a boat, which presently landed its occupants on the beach, — Count Gorgei, the captain, and four armed sailors. The Servian officers saluted the Count respectfully.

“Where is the money?” demanded the captain, without preface.

“Here!” replied one of its custodians, indicating the chest.

“And the — the other article?”

The captain looked incredulously at the small chest, and demanded that it be opened. The lid was unlocked and lifted, disclosing packed tiers of rouleaux of bluish paper, each marked “500f.” The pirate broke one experimentally. It contained twenty bright, new gold coins.

Thus placated, he produced a parcel from his breast, and unfolded the Iron Star. The Servians examined it closely, and the Count after pointing out certain indisputable evidences of its age, swore upon the sacred relic held clasped in his hands that it was the genuine article.

The four sailors were manifestly uneasy and anxious to be off

with their treasure, but the captain was suspicious, and by no means in a hurry. "Next," he said, with a certain cunning complacency, "the money must be counted."

The seamen murmured, but the Cretan insisted upon his precaution. He spread out his coat upon the shingle, and kneeling beside, commenced to count out the rouleaux, having previously ascertained how many the box should contain. Occasionally he broke one open, and the bright gold lay in shining heaps upon the blue cloth. The sailors gathered closely round, excited by the spectacle, and even the Count and the Servians looked with scarcely less interest over the shoulders of the crouching group.

Meanwhile a new influence was entering the game, unnoticed by all. The men on shore were too much absorbed in the treasure to keep a lookout, and in any case the rising rocks to the eastward would have concealed the noiseless electric launch that ran swiftly down the eastern coast, close under the cliffs. She carried sixteen men, there was a Maxim gun mounted in her bows, and she came quite unseen under the shelter of the rugged islet at the harbor mouth. Thus concealed from the eyes of the few men left aboard the yacht, she landed ten of her men on this rock. Then she moved out into full view, in the harbor itself.

Even at this, the group on the beach did not notice her, but the armed men on the islet were seen from the yacht, and were hailed excitedly. In response, three bullets went singing over the steamer's rails, advising those aboard that they were at the mercy of the rifles a hundred yards across the water. The pirates threw themselves flat on the deck to avoid the threatened volley, and the men ashore sprang up and found themselves confronted by the muzzle of a Maxim at ten rods.

The pirates swore impotently, while the Servians clamored for joy, believing that their government had sent them aid. But the launch's crew waited, giving neither shot nor answering cry.

In about two minutes the throbbing of a screw was heard, and a second yacht rounded the end of the island and stopped. She carried no flag, and there were rapid-fire guns mounted along her rail. At her appearance, the launch ran close in shore, and the coxswain called:—

"Is Count Gorgei there?"

"Yes," cried the Count, in answer.

"You are our prisoner. Come aboard." And the Count waded out and boarded the launch, which took her men off the rock, and then, moving to the strange yacht, was hoisted in. This vessel at once got under way and moved off to the southeast at such a rate that in half an hour only her smoke lay in a thin trail along the horizon.

Just how the pirates and the five Servians settled the business of the Iron Star and the gold has never yet been divulged, or whether, indeed, the Count did not carry off the relic with him to the rescuing yacht. Neither the Star, nor the gold, nor the Count's yacht, nor her crew, nor the five Servians have ever reappeared within Servia's ken.

The Count himself appeared at Paris shortly after, and meanwhile popular excitement at Belgrade ran so high that the present impracticability of the Bulgarian alliance was admitted by all parties concerned. Consequently Prince Anton went home by his special train, and the city quieted itself. All newspaper readers will remember the sensational story of the Princess Aline's flight to Vienna, a few months later, where she met Count Gorgei and was married. The pair have presumably lived happily ever since, but they have displayed a decided preference for Paris and Vienna to their native land. Yet it is well understood that Servia is ready to welcome them back with honors on the trifling condition that the Count reveal the present location of the Iron Star. But this, for reasons best known to himself, he has failed to do.

