

HUSBAND-POISONING IN HUNGARY.

Vienna Dispatch to the London Standard.

Thekla Popov, the peasant woman who is being tried on a charge of aiding and abetting upward of a hundred women in poisoning their husbands, is a very remarkable character—destined to occupy a position at once unique and picturesque in the annals of crime. She is a gypsy and is now some 70 years of age. She lived in a little village named Melencze, and it may almost be said that murder was her trade. People say she had her agents and emissaries, whose business it was to keep up her "connection," and it must have been a horrid and gruesome spectacle to see the grizzly hag seated in her arm-chair every day, receiving her customers during business hours, and giving them the diabolical advice and aid they sought. They were all married women from the neighboring country side, eager, for some reason or another, to get rid of husbands who obstinately refused to die in the ordinary course of nature, but who by Thekla's friendly offices might be made amenable to the resources of art. These wretches paid the old gypsy a fee of from 50 to 100 florins for each bottle of poison they bought, and were duly instructed by her in the safest methods of its "exhibition."

Thekla Popov's clients were, however, not always married women. Sometimes she had dealings with young girls who quarreled with their sweethearts, and who, from jealousy or rage, had determined to kill them. This woman's terrible trade prospered amazingly for two years. She excited no suspicion, because the drugs she administered acted slowly, though surely, and in their effects simulated the symptoms of disease. Even now that the bodies of some of her victims have been exhumed they show no signs of poisoning, though the stomachs are eaten away. The first case that set people on the alert was that of one Jozza Kukin, a rich peasant, who died at Melencze two months ago. Ugly rumors about his death were spread, and the gossips whispered mysterious hints of foul play. There was in consequence an inquest; but the most careful post-mortem examination failed to reveal any traces of poisoning in his case. The whole story was slipping out of the memories of the villagers when suddenly a dreadful revelation was made. A Gypsy girl, the daughter of old Thekla Popov, came before the Court at Gross Bedskerek and horrified it by the tale she had to tell. She confessed that she gave the wife of Jozza Kukin a bottle of some red liquid poison prepared by her mother. She did this by her mother's instructions. Having had a quarrel with her respected parent over some property, she determined to betray her. Thekla Popov's daughter further declared that she actually saw Kukin's wife pour this poison into his coffee, and that she told her mother what she knew and had seen. To this the old Gypsy replied, "One day I will poison you also, unless you hold your tongue."

Of course, this statement caused Thekla Popov and the widow of Kukin to be arrested. They, however, denied the charge brought against them. Oddly enough, the Judge, by a clever ruse not quite in keeping with English notions of fair play to accused prisoners, managed to overhear the two women talking the affair over in jail. Among other things he overheard was Kukin's widow saying to her accomplice: "Well, I am young and pretty. He was old and ugly. Why should he not die?" The Judge, after that, had little doubt that the prisoners were guilty. They were, therefore, put on their trial, and the clue thus unexpectedly placed in the hands of the authorities was actively followed up. Strange discoveries were soon made, showing that from the woman Thekla Popov as a centre, a vast and complex ramification of crime extended far and wide throughout the community. The trial has been deferred for several weeks, so that the bodies of men supposed to have been murdered by their wives may be exhumed and subjected to post-mortem examination.

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