The Shadow of a Midnight

By Maurice Baring

Table of Contents

The Shadow of a Midnight

By Maurice Baring

A Ghost Story

It was nine o'clock in the evening. Sasha, the maid, had brought in the samovar and placed it at the head of the long table. Marie Nikolaevna, our hostess, poured out the tea. Her husband was playing Vindt with his daughter, the doctor, and his son−in−law in another corner of the room.

And Jameson, who had just finished his Russian lesson—he was working for the Civil Service examination—was reading the last number of the Rouskoe Slovo.

"Have you found anything interesting, Frantz Frantzovitch?" said Marie Nikolaevna to Jameson, as she handed him a glass of tea.

"Yes, I have," answered the Englishman, looking up. His eyes had a clear dreaminess about them, which generally belongs only to fanatics or visionaries, and I had no reason to believe that Jameson, who seemed to be common sense personified, was either one or the other. "At least,"

he continued, "it interests me. And it's odd—very odd."

"What is it?" asked Marie Nikolaevna.

"Well, to tell you what it is would mean a long story which you wouldn't believe," said Jameson; "only it's odd—very odd."

"Tell us the story," I said.

"As you won't believe a word of it," Jameson repeated, "it's not much use my telling it."

We insisted on hearing the story, so Jameson lit a cigarette, and began:— "Two years ago," he said, "I was at Heidelberg, at the University, and I made friends with a young fellow called Braun. His parents were German, but he had lived five or six years in America, and he was practically an American. I made his acquaintance by chance at a lecture, when I first arrived, and he helped me in a number of ways. He was an energetic and kind−hearted fellow, and we became great friends. He was a student, but he did not belong to any Korps or Bursenschaft, he was working hard then. Afterwards he became an engineer. When the summer Semester came to an end, we both stayed on at Heidelberg. One day Braun suggested that we should go for a walking tour and explore the country. I was only too pleased, and we started. It was glorious weather, and we enjoyed ourselves hugely. On the third night after we had started we arrived at a village called Salzheim. It was a picturesque little place, and there was a curious old church in it with some interesting tombs and relics of the Thirty Years War.

But the inn where we put up for the night was even more picturesque than the church. It had been a convent for nuns, only the greater part of it had been burnt, and only a quaint gabled house, and a kind of tower covered with ivy, which I suppose had once been the belfry, remained. We had an excellent supper and went to bed early. We had been given two bedrooms, which were airy and clean, and altogether we were satisfied. My bedroom opened into Braun's, which was beyond it, and had no other door of its own. It was a hot night in July, and Braun asked me to leave the door open. I did—we opened both the windows. Braun went to bed and fell asleep almost directly, for very soon I heard his snores. "I had imagined that I was longing for sleep, but no sooner had I got into bed than all my sleepiness left me. This was odd, because we had walked a good many miles, and it had been a blazing hot day, and up till then I had slept like a log the moment I got into bed. I lit a candle and began reading a small volume of Heine I carried with me. I heard the clock strike ten, and then eleven, and still I felt that sleep was out of the question. I said to myself: 'I will read till twelve and then I will stop.' My watch was on a chair.by my bedside, and when the clock struck eleven I noticed that it was five minutes slow, and set it right. I could see the church tower from my window, and every time the clock struck—and it struck the quarters—the noise

boomed through the room.

"When the clock struck a quarter to twelve I yawned for the first time, and I felt thankful that sleep seemed at last to be coming to me. I left off reading, and taking my watch in my hand I waited for midnight to strike. This quarter of an hour seemed an eternity. At last the hands of my watch showed that it was one minute to twelve. I put out my candle and began counting sixty, waiting for the clock to strike. I had counted a hundred and sixty, and still the clock had not struck. I counted up to four hundred; then I thought I must have made a mistake. I lit my candle again, and looked at my watch: it was two minutes past twelve. And still the clock had not struck!

"A curious uncomfortable feeling came over me, and I sat up in bed with my watch in my hand and longed to call Braun, who was peacefully snoring, but I did not like to. I sat like this till a quarter past twelve; the clock struck the quarter as usual. I made up my mind that the clock must have struck twelve, and that I must have slept for a minute—at the same time I knew I had not slept—and I put out my candle. I must have fallen asleep almost directly.

"The next thing I remember was waking with a start. It seemed to me that some one had shut the door between my room and Braun's. I felt for the matches. The match−box was empty. Up to that moment—I cannot tell why—something—an unaccountable dread—had prevented me looking at the door. I made an effort and looked. It was shut, and through the cracks and through the keyhole I saw the glimmer of a light. Braun had lit his candle. I called him, not very loudly: there was no answer. I called again more loudly: there was still no answer.

"Then I got out of bed and walked to the door. As I went, it was gently and slightly opened, just enough to show me a thin streak of light. At that moment I felt that some one was looking at me. Then it was instantly shut once more, as softly as it had been opened. There was not a sound to be heard. I walked on tiptoe towards the door, but it seemed to me that I had taken a hundred years to cross the room. And when at last I reached the door I felt I could not open it. I was simply paralysed with fear. And still I saw the glimmer through the key−hole and the cracks.

"Suddenly, as I was standing transfixed with fright in front of the door, I heard sounds coming from Braun's room, a shuffle of footsteps, and voices talking low but distinctly in a language I could not understand. It was not Italian, Spanish, nor French. The voices grew all at once louder; I heard the noise of a struggle and a cry which ended in a stifled groan, very painful and horrible to hear. Then, whether I regained my self−control, or whether it was excess of fright which prompted me, I don't know, but I flew to the door and tried to open it. Some one or something was pressing with all its might against it. Then I screamed at the top of my voice, and as I screamed I heard the cock crow.

"The door gave, and I almost fell into Braun's room. It was quite dark. But Braun was waked by my screams and quietly lit a match. He asked me gently what on earth was the matter. The room was empty and everything was in its place. Outside the first greyness of dawn was in the sky.

"I said I had had a nightmare, and asked him if he had not had one as well; but Braun said he had never slept better in his life.

"The next day we went on with our walking tour, and when we got back to Heidelberg Braun sailed for America. I never saw him again, although we corresponded frequently, and only last week I had a letter from him, dated Nijni Novgorod, saying he would be at Moscow before the end of the month.

"And now I suppose you are all wondering what this can have to do with anything that's in the newspaper. Well, listen," and he read out the following paragraph from the Rouskoe Slovo:— "Samara, II, ix. In the centre of the town, in the Hotel ——, a band of armed swindlers attacked a German engineer named Braun and demanded money. On his refusal one of the robbers stabbed Braun with a knife. The robbers, taking the money which was on him, amounting to 500 roubles, got away. Braun called for assistance, but died of his wounds in the night. It appears that he had met the swindlers at a restaurant."

"Since I have been in Russia," Jameson added, "I have often thought that I knew what language it was that was talked behind the door that night in the inn at Salzheim, but now I know it was Russian."