

The Suicide Quartet

Mima Simić

(Translated from Croatian by Filip Krenus)

Guest Editor's Note:

'The Suicide Quartet' is the first translation into English of Mima Simić's short story 'Kvartet samoubojica' from the collection *Pustolovine Glorije Scott* (The Adventures of Gloria Scott), published in 2005 in Croatian (Zagreb: AGM). The short stories chronicle the surreal cases of the detective Gloria Scott from the perspective of her faithful companion Mary Lambert. Named after a ship from Arthur Conan Doyle's story about Sherlock Holmes's first case ('The Adventure of the Gloria Scott', 1893), Gloria Scott is the famous detective's very opposite: relying on intuition rather than deduction, on wild guesses rather than empirically derived conclusion, Scott shoots first and asks questions later. The short story collection plays with the Holmes canon and offers a topsy-turvy hybridisation of the Victorian detective story. As its characters, the collection includes the names of selected authors of classic literature as well as real-life figures from popular culture (like in the story below), mixing various elements of the English literary canon with those from Croatian and other non-Anglophone literary traditions. Relying on a thoroughly dark sense of humour, the collection offers a gender-bending queering of the Victorian detective. (AP)

That morning I found my friend in a truly terrible state. The unhealthy hue of her face, which from a distance looked pretty enough, hinted that once again she had been using someone else's gear. On top of that, she was shivering from a fever like a beech tree in the wind, and it was enough only to glance at her veins to diagnose thrombosis. All this sickened me. As I contemplated whether I should stay or leave, her feeble voice dispelled my confusion: – Mary... Is that you, my friend?

– Of course it's me! Who else would appear in public with a face like mine?

– I replied, slightly irritated by her occasional and surprising stupidity.

– Don't be angry with me, old girl – she said. – Yesterday's case really drained me. That's why I'm in this sorry state.

I felt a sudden and churning pang of guilt because of my outburst, and so I asked her with concern in my voice: – In God's name, what happened?

– Ah, if you only knew... She coughed feebly into her handkerchief, already streaked with blood in places. After spitting out a fresh clot, she began her

intriguing story. – You know, this is probably going to be one of the most interesting cases you have ever...

– Oh Gloria, is that blood... I mean, I'm sorry. Do tell what happened!

– My dear Mary, if you would be so kind as to hear me out without interrupting, I shall recant a very unusual occurrence...

I kept silent and waited. There was a pause, and just when Gloria opened her mouth to continue her tale, there came the sound of urgent voices at the door, and then a loud knocking. Gloria turned pale. Now the colour of her skin could have been compared to post-mortem lividity of boiled beef with mustard. She stammered: – Mary... – and sank into the cushions.

A brawny gentleman and an elderly lady with an alarmingly dark moustache burst into the room. Beneath the uncouth nature of their entrance, I immediately sensed something was out of joint. But holding back my unease, I asked them coldly:

– How the devil dare you... why, these are private quarters, don't you know?

– Does Mrs Gloria Scott reside here? – asked the moustachioed lady rather haughtily.

– Yes, but what may be the meaning of this...?

– We are here because of the unfortunate event at Westminster yesterday – the gentleman announced, without even taking off his blue velvet bowler hat. My friend was startled: – Oh, my goodness! Why, it's you!

– No – replied the gentleman in a dignified manner, whilst removing his hat.

– I am Stephen Fleming, and the lady over there is Miss Juliette Binoche. We are here on business.

– Well, sit down, sit down! – Gloria exclaimed.

– Mary – she addressed me. – Listen carefully, I beg of you! This conversation is of extreme importance.

I began to take notes. Two hours later, when the strange couple had left the office at 256 Butcher Street, my notes were as follows:

– gas has gone up by 3,5%;

– the mother of Miss Binoche has peptic ulcer (which is more than evident from her bloody stool);

– Mr Fleming broke a precious vase this morning, a cherished memento;

– young master Fleming, the son of Mr Fleming, has fallen in with a bad crowd, and at a recent party managed to get a young lady, a certain Miranda Richardson, into trouble.

I didn't have the foggiest what these entries might mean. However, Gloria didn't keep me long in my state of uncertainty.

– Let us wait a few more moments – she said. – I'm expecting a certain young person...

Indeed, not more than ten moments later, a young girl appeared at the door, properly dressed, evidently from a good middle class family, and one with breeding to boot. Having entered, she curtsied deferentially first to myself and then to Gloria. However, she stood stiffly for a while, wondering which one of us to address first. Gloria interrupted the silence:

– Come in, Miss Richardson. I see you've received my message. Still, you needn't have rushed so.

Gloria was holding some notes, which she leafed through absent-mindedly. She raised her eyes, looked at the girl pointedly, and said: – So, you were born on the 3rd of February 1899 in Copenhagen, you were educated in Germany, you dabble in trade, live with your parents...

– Yes, but how do you know...? Everything you say is true! Only... I was actually born on the 28th of January in Floydsfork. And I haven't completed my education at all, for I was expelled from school due to indecent behaviour. And I live here on the dock with the beggars...

– Like I said... – muttered Gloria. – But you should also know that I summoned you because of what happened yesterday...

– Ah, yes! Rupert offered to pay for the abortion, and I've accepted. Everything is fine now. I saw that his father and his mistress, that Binoche woman, paid you a visit. I'm sure they offered you a king's ransom to rid them of the scandal. But I won't accept any kind of agreement. I've arranged it all with Rupert. I will abort my child and we will marry, only not until he finds employment... – the young woman said with passion.

– Ha ha ha! – Gloria Scott burst into laughter. – You really believe him! And when he told me just yesterday that he's only been waiting for you to abort before he gets rid of you. It will be like child's play, to use his own

words – my friend mocked her.

– No, that simply cannot be! – cried the unfortunate woman. – You’re lying! Rupert loves me! He’s told me so many times! We’re going to get married!

At that point the girl began sobbing hysterically, after which she jumped up, and dashed from the room, slamming the door behind her.

– I predict that this is not the last visit for today.

And, of course, I had barely managed to clear my throat when a young man’s black wavy hair and sideburns entwined with his beard suddenly appeared at the door. He was so out of breath, it was as if he’d ran all the way from Brighton.

– Huuehueuehueueh – he panted. – I ran all the way from Brighton! So, Miranda was here? Ah, where’s my girl?

– Calm down, young man – said Gloria gently. – Rest assured the girl is in a safe place. In fact, we spoke a little... But what brings you here? – she asked, curling her toes and closing her eyes at the same time, something she used to do in moments of deep concentration.

– I heard that my bastard father’s been here. That man wants to stop our wedding at all costs. But he shan’t succeed, no sir! We’re in love!

Suddenly somebody knocked at the door.

It was the postman, who was delivering a telegram for my friend. She read it aloud to herself, and then silently to everyone. It said: “MISS SCOTT YOUNG STOP MIRANDA RICHARDSON STOP FOUND STOP HEAD IN STOP GAS OVEN STOP SUSPECTED STOP SUICIDE STOP SCOTLAND STOP YARD STOP”

The youth turned as pale as death.

– It’s their fault! – he cried and stabbed himself with Gloria’s paper knife, which just happened to be on the table. Gloria called the police and they carried the body out.

Some time after this, his father and the moustachioed lady were also found dead. Gloria and I wondered about it the entire evening, and she even injected three-quarters of a gram more than usual.

The case turned out to be a rather costly one indeed.