

## Introduction

The adventures of *Sâr Dubnotal* were published anonymously in France in 1909. The identity of its author(s?) remains unknown even today. It has been suggested that the series might have been the work of the prolific Norbert Sevestre, but this is unsupported by any actual documentary evidence and, frankly, Sevestre's work was much better in style, characterization and plotting than *Sâr Dubnotal*, obviously written in a hurry, often loosely plotted, and rarely researched.

It is highly improbable that the unknown author of *Sâr Dubnotal* was familiar with the adventures of *Ozmar the Mystic* (1896) by Emeric Hulme-Beaman, E. and H. Heron's "psychic detective" *Flaxman Low*<sup>1</sup> or former theosophist and Golden Dawn member Algernon Blackwood's *John Silence* (1908), but he might have been at least vaguely aware of their existence. It is quite possible that our anonymous storyteller was commissioned by the publisher, Eichler, to create a French version of such characters, in the same way that they would later ask Jean Petithuguenin to pen the adventures of *Ethel King*, the female *Nick Carter*, in 1911.<sup>2</sup>

Today, the best remembered successors to *John Silence* and *Sâr Dubnotal* are William Hope Hodgson's *Carnacki the Ghost-Finder* (1913); Aleister Crowley's (writing as Edward Kelly) *Simon Iff* (1917); Violet Firth's (writing as Dion Fortune) *Dr. Taverner* (1926); and Manly Wade Wellman's *Judge Pursuivant* (1938).

One thing is certain: unlike some of the authors mentioned above, whoever wrote the adventures of *Sâr Dubnotal* was not actually well versed in the Occult, and relied on dubious and often mangled sources for his plots. Some of the pseudo-esoteric mumbo-jumbo used in the series was likely inspired by Eusapia Palladino, Eliphas Lévi, Madame Blavatsky, Jules Bois, and the so-called Sâr Joséphin Péladan—whose title was appropriated by the author—spiced up with a little jargon borrowed from Friedrich Nietzsche.

As for the term "psychagogue," it is often equated with "necromancer," but its meaning derives from the Greek *psychagogos*, which referred to the god Hermes, whose role included guiding souls into the Underworld. Like the word "psychognosis," it was re-appropriated by 19th century psychologists, for whom "psychology" became a kind of psychotherapy; needless to say, it is used in *Sâr Dubnotal* in its original sense.

### Who is *Sâr Dubnotal*?

The origins of *Sâr Dubnotal* were never spelled out by its creator, but we know that the so-called "Great Psychagogue," also nicknamed the "Napoléon of the Intangible," the "Master of Psychognosis," the "Conqueror of the Invisible," and more simply "El Tebib"—meaning the Doctor in Arabic—is a westerner, despite his stylish oriental guise.

*Sâr Dubnotal* was born in Mumbai. His exact age is unknown, but he is probably much older than he seems. He was schooled by the Rosicrucians, and learned the ancient secrets of the Hindu mystics. He is capable of telepathy, levitation and hypnotism.

His regular companions are Rudolph, his disciple, a European youth whom he rescued from gypsies and to whom he is teaching his knowledge; Gianetti Annunciata, an Italian medium who helps him communicate with the dead; Naini, his faithful Hindu servant and strong man; and an international trio of private detectives consisting of Frank (an Englishman), Fréjus (a Frenchman), and Otto (a German).

When confronted by a particularly difficult case, *Sâr Dubnotal* uses telepathy to contact the yogi Ranijesti, with whom he once studied psychognosis. Well versed in the Occult, Ranijesti had himself entombed alive in an underground cell in Benares so that he could enjoy the bliss associated with nirvana

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<sup>1</sup> Written by Hesketh Pritchard and his mother Kate, and published in *Pearson's Magazine* in 1898-99

<sup>2</sup> Available from Black Coat Press, ISBN 978-1-61227-233-7.

in a state of temporary suspended animation. But before descending into his tomb, Ranijesti promised Sâr Dubnotal to enlighten him any time the Great Psychagogue would find himself embarrassed by a psychic problem.

Sâr Dubnotal owns houses in Trez-Hir in Brittany, on the Champs-Élysées in Paris, and in Cheyne Walk in London. (He is therefore Carnacki's neighbor!) He also owns several yachts, including the *Brahma* and the *Derviche*. Finally, he also owns an atoll called Redemption Island, located along the Tropic of Cancer in the Pacific Ocean, where he sends villains to be reformed.

Like Carnacki, Sâr Dubnotal likes to mix modern science with more traditional occult spells and recipes, having invented such devices as a camera that can photograph astral bodies, and a telegraph that can communicate with the dead.

### *Publishing History*

A general introduction to the *Sâr Dubnotal* series was included in our first volume,<sup>3</sup> and there is no need to repeat all of it here. Suffice it to say that twenty issues of *Sâr Dubnotal* were published by Eichler, starting in January 1909. They are:

1. *Le Manoir Hanté de Crec'h-ar-Van* (The Haunted Manor of Crec'h-ar-Van) (included in our Volume 1)
2. *La Table Tournante du Docteur Tooth* (Dr. Tooth's Turning Table)
3. *Le Puits Fatal* (The Fatal Well)
4. *Le Médium Tragique* (The Tragic Medium)
5. *La Grève Sanglante* (The Bloody Beach)
6. *La Détraquée du Passage Rimbaud* (The Madwoman of Passage Rimbaud)
7. *Tserpchikopf, le Sanglant Hypnotiseur* (Tserpchikopf, the Bloody Hypnotist) (included in our Volume 1)
8. *La Piste Astrale* (The Astral Trail) (presented in this volume)
9. *L'Écartelée de Montmartre* (The Quartered Woman of Montmartre) (included in our Volume 1)
10. *Jack l'Éventreur* (Jack the Ripper) (included in our Volume 1)
11. *Haine Posthume* (Posthumous Hatred) (included in our Volume 1)
12. *La Fiancée de Gibraltar* (The Fiancée of Gibraltar)
13. *Les Vampires du Cimetière* (The Vampires of the Cemetery)
14. *L'Empreinte Rouge* (The Red Mark)
15. *La Somnambule du Gué Sanglant* (The Somnambulist of the River of Blood)
16. *L'Affaire Azzef-Poloukhine* (The Azzef-Poloukhine Affair)
17. *Un Complot Terroriste* (A Terrorist Plot)
18. *Dans l'Enfer Sibérien* (In the Siberian Hell)
19. *Azzef, le Roi des Agents Provocateurs* (Azzef, King of the Agents Provocateurs)
20. *Double-Taf, le Dernier des Pentyerns* (Double-Taf, Last of the Pentyerns)

Our previous collection comprised five linked episodes: No.1, which introduced the villainous Tserpchikopf, then Nos. 7, 9, 10 and 11. A copy of No.8, *The Astral Trail*, could not be located, but its substance was summarized in the translation of No.9.

This series-within-the-series sees Sâr Dubnotal fight a villain called Tserpchikopf, the "Bloody Hypnotist," who is also an evil mastermind with psychic powers and the leader of a criminal network called The Chessmen, where members are given names of chess pieces: Queen, Knight, Pawn, etc., Tserpchikopf being, of course, the King. It turns out that the villain is also behind the murders attributed to Jack the Ripper.

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<sup>3</sup> ISBN 978-1-934543-94-8.

*The Many Lives of Sâr Dubnotal*

Sâr Dubnotal has proved himself to be a popular character, featured in many new stories published in our annual anthology series, *Tales of the Shadowmen*, devoted to heroes and villains drawn from French popular literature.

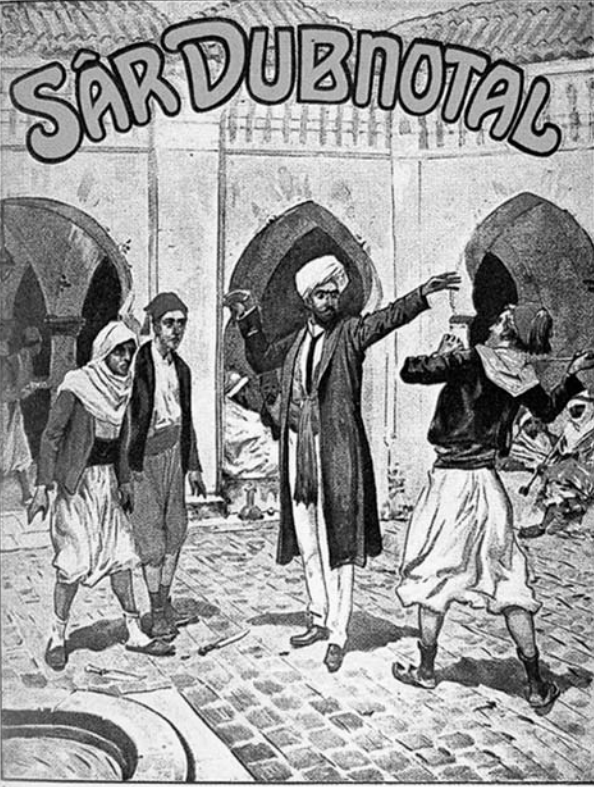
In addition to the stories reprinted in this collection, we encourage our readers to seek out *Harry Dickson and the Werewolf of Rutherford Grange*<sup>4</sup> by G.L. Gick in which the Sâr teams up with a young Harry Dickson to defeat a monstrous creature from beyond.

Now read on!

Jean-Marc & Randy Lofficier

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<sup>4</sup> ISBN 978-1-935558-80-4.



Chaque fascicule contient un récit complet.

«Sar Dubnotal» • 44 le grand pay de la guerre à ses côtés attendent... qu'il leur fasse...

## THE ASTRAL TRAIL

(translated by Brian Stableford)

### I: The Tutelary Spirit

“Master, I’m very sorry to tell you, on behalf of my comrades, that all our investigations have been fruitless. The Pawn cannot be found.”

Those words were addressed to Sâr Dubnotal, the great master of psychognosis, and the person who had just pronounced them respectfully was Fréjus, one of his most skillful investigators.

The confession of impotence made by Fréjus did not have the wherewithal to trouble the superhuman.

Sâr Dubnotal had probably expected that failure on the part of the sleuths he employed, for he sent the delegate away with a simple nod of the head, without manifesting the slightest discontentment or surprise.

For nearly four months the psychagogue had been occupied with an extremely important and mysterious affair that obliged him to call upon all the resources of his extraordinary intelligence and supernatural science.

As you know, after living for a long time in Chaldea and India, in the company of yogis and mages, Sâr Dubnotal, who had discovered, among other secrets, those of longevity and the crystallization of carbon, had come to Europe to put his immense fortune and admirable knowledge at the service of Progress and Justice.

Following certain circumstances that we have described in our preceding narratives, the Great Psychagogue, then on vacation at his bungalow in Trez-Hir, on the Breton coast, had unmasked and arrested Comtesse Azilis de Treguilly, who was guilty of the murder of her brother-in-law and her husband, with the objective of obtaining their inheritance and remarrying a supposed Russian boyar, Prince Tserpchikopf, a most redoubtable malefactor, who had driven her to commit the crime.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, Tserpchikopf had escaped the punishment that awaited him. A powerful hypnotist, he had, to tell the truth, formidable trumps in his hand, and he had made use of them with diabolical skill.

Once captured by Sâr Dubnotal, the wretched Azilis had succeeded in getting away with the Russian’s help.

Sâr Dubnotal had instructed Naini, his gigantic Hindu servant, to take the woman to a destination only known to him and his aides, of which we shall have occasion to speak later.

Until Marseilles, the journey of Naini and Azilis had not given rise to any incident. Staying at the Royal Palace in the Cours Belzunce on a Tuesday evening, they were due to embark the following day, but on the Wednesday morning Naini had been found unconscious and Azilis had disappeared. Quickly alerted to the capture of the Comtesse, Tserpchikopf had leapt on to the same train, had succeeded in communicating with the criminal and conceived a bold escape plan.

The Hindu, a stern and vigorous man, not being easy to hypnotize, the rogues had decided to poison him with a few drops of an infernal drug fabricated with *upas antiar*, a drug that Tserpchikopf had secretly stolen from the indigenes of Malaya, and which leaves no suspicious traces in the body.

The plan succeeded, and the police thought that Naini had died suddenly.

At the hotel, Tserpchikopf had registered under the name Schönprink. The bandit possessed false identity papers, and, although momentarily suspected of having been mixed up in the tenebrous affair, he was not troubled.

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<sup>5</sup> See our previous volume, *Sâr Dubnotal vs. Jack the Ripper*.

In the interval, Sâr Dubnotal had hastened to Marseilles after having telegraphed the examining magistrate to wait for his arrival before proceeding with the autopsy of Naini's body, transported to the morgue the day before.

It was then that the Pawn had made his appearance. Warned by a dispatch from that enigmatic individual that the Great Psychagogue and his associates had taken a special express train, the pseudo-Schönprink had gone to plant a bomb on the railway line between Arles and Avignon, at a place where the track crossed a bridge over a tributary of the Rhône.

The express had been derailed, and the master and his followers had only escaped a frightful death by a miracle. Continuing their tragically-interrupted journey, those heroes had only thrown themselves more ardently on their enemy's track.

The *upas antiar* had not killed Naini, but merely rendered him torpid. His master recalled him to life just as the medical examiners, convinced of his death, were about to proceed with the formal autopsy.

On the other hand, an intelligent investigation on the part of the Frenchman Fréjus had permitted them to pick up the trail of the fugitives. They had taken refuge in England, where Azilis was passing as a medium and her companion as a celebrated yogi.

The false mage Luckvrak and the fake medium Dolorosa, unmasked in the middle of an occult séance, spent a bad quarter of an hour.

Rudolph, the master's favored disciple, took possession of Azilis, but while being taken to the nearest police station in a taxi, Tserpchikopf had hypnotized his guards on the way and given them the slip.

The next day, when Sâr Dubnotal went to the police station to ask for news of the boyar, he found that the two constables had been locked up. Knowing that they had not been corrupted by the pretended Luckvrak, as the inspector was convinced, Sâr Dubnotal had defended them, and his intervention had saved them from serious disciplinary punishment.

Azilis, taken back to Trez-Hir, was embarked on the *Derviche*, a superb steam-yacht that Sâr Dubnotal had summoned from Colombo in order to take her directly to the place of detention he intended for her, to prevent Tserpchikopf from making any further attempt to rescue her.

Once the yacht had departed, the Great Psychagogue, freed from concern with the Comtesse, had devoted all his efforts to picking up the trail of Tserpchikopf. He abandoned Trez-Hir and all his staff in order to take up residence in Paris, in his magnificent house in the Champs-Élysées, which his immense fortune had permitted him to acquire.

It was, in fact, better for him to remain constantly in the City of Light, where everything led him to believe that Tserpchikopf had maintained secret relations with a notorious criminal brotherhood, and where the fake boyar had probably come to take refuge after his adventure in London.

Before the arrest of Azilis, Tserpchikopf had occupied an apartment in the Rue Voltaire. He had left suddenly without paying the rent he owed and had not been seen since, but it was possible that he had found refuge with the mysterious Pawn, whose identity, thus far, all the research carried out by Otto, Frank and Fréjus, the master's three secret agents, had been unable to discover.

Every morning, one of the investigators came to Sâr Dubnotal to report on the previous day's research, and every time the report was the same: nothing.

It was impossible to discover the slightest clue. The Pawn might have been a myth, who had only become more illusory as a result of the efforts of the three investigators.

As for Tserpchikopf, one might have thought that he had disappeared in a puff of smoke. Disappeared at the end of September, they had reached the beginning of December without hearing any mention of him.

When the door of his study had closed behind the discomfited Fréjus, Sâr Dubnotal fell into a profound reverie.

The noble lines of his face had not contracted, and nothing filtered through his half-closed eyelids but a distracted gaze, as if he were deep in the contemplation of invisible things.

In contrast to the unusual luxury that reigned in the other rooms of his new and princely dwelling, the master's study presented the most severe aspect. The furniture, green in hue, was limited to a desk, a

side-table, a sofa and a few comfortable armchairs, in one of which Sâr Dubnotal was presently leaning back.

Nevertheless, the study did not lack a certain style, with its decorated ceiling, from which a large green crystal chandelier was suspended, and the rare and costly drapes of the same shade with which the windows were curtained. The latter overlooked an interior courtyard planted with trees.

The side-table was not even covered by a cloth but the desk was cluttered with old papyrus, a monumental writing pad, a human skull playing the role of paperweight, and a Hindu gong.

A methodically-regulated heater spread a mild warmth through the room, which remained plunged in a half-light like that of an aquarium.

Eventually, Sâr Dubnotal stretched out his arm and pressed the button of the gong. A stroke resounded, and then two more. Shortly afterwards, a young man came in without knocking, followed by a woman dressed in the Italian style. They were Rudolph, the Great Psychagogue's principal disciple, and Annunciata Gianetti, one of his best mediums.

"I need you," he said to them. "Sit down, Rudolph, next to my armchair, and you, Annunciata, in front of the side-table."

The newcomers obeyed without unsealing their lips. One did not question the orders of Sâr Dubnotal; one obeyed them passively, whatever they might be.

"Rudolph," the psychagogue went on, "it's necessary to finish with Tserpchikopf. I can't tolerate that rogue continuing to hold me in check. Since ordinary means have failed, I've decided to make use of others.

"Are you thinking of evoking the spirit of the late Jean de Treguilly, Azilis' husband, Master?" the young man asked.

"No—not yet, at least. Jean de Treguilly has suffered too much for me to voluntarily trouble the peace that he's been experiencing since I unmasked his wife and Tserpchikopf."

"In that case, Master...?"

"I'm going to consult the astral double of my friend Ranijesti, and, thanks to him, I hope to be able to disentangle this confusion."

Rudolph understood; his eyes sparkled with admiration and enthusiasm.

Sâr Dubnotal's principal disciple was prodigiously interested in his master's psychic experiments, and saw with joy the mysterious ribbon of an astral trail opening before him, at the end of which he had no doubt that Tserpchikopf would finally fall into the power of the superhuman Sâr, a great redresser of wrongs and, when necessary, an implacable administrator of justice.

For what made Sâr Dubnotal more than a mere mortal was, above all, the faculty that he had of penetrating the invisible and directing himself there as surely as in the material world. One might have thought that he possessed a sixth sense. He undoubtedly had a precious aide in Ranijesti, the Hindu ascetic in whose company he had once studied magnetism and hypnotism, and who had had himself immured alive in an underground cell in Benares in order to free himself from terrestrial contingencies and permit his double to explore the regions of infinity.

The two friends were not separated because of that, and they continued to communicate via Sâr Dubnotal's intermediary.

It was Ranijesti that the Great Psychagogue sometimes called his "tutelary spirit," and sometimes his "invisible policeman," because he extended over him a kind of occult protection and guided him in his astral research.

In each of his numerous domiciles, Sâr Dubnotal had installed an evocation chamber where tutelary spirits could be received. He called those special chambers "green rooms" because of their uniform color.

In the Champs-Élysées, it was a study that played the role of green room, and that was why it differed so much from the other apartments of his princely residence.

As soon as Rudolph was informed of the Great Psychagogue's intentions, he took three ample green smocks from a cupboard, which Sâr Dubnotal, Annunciata and he put on. Then the Italian, a small, pale but pretty woman, nervous and thin, after having armed herself with a black wand, came to lie down on the sofa placed behind the round table.

“Annunciata,” pronounced the psychagogue, in a forceful voice, while darting a sharp glance at the recumbent woman, “ask my friend Ranijesti to respond to us right away.”

With these words, *la* Gianetti raised herself up, tapped the table with her wand, and fell back on the sofa as if dead.

Sâr Dubnotal and Rudolph retreated to the back of the room, after having placed a golden propelling pencil and a sheet of white velum on the table.

A strange obscurity had suddenly overtaken the green room. The curtains had abruptly slid, of their own accord, along their rods, completely cutting off the daylight.

The two psychagogues, however, were able to distinguish a kind of white mist that emanated from Annunciata’s body, and Sâr Dubnotal murmured:

“The medium is entering into communication with the Hindu’s double, Rudolph; the experiment will succeed.”

In fact, the master and the disciple were soon witness to an extraordinary scene.

The pale wisp of vapor that emerged from Annunciata’s body gradually condensed between the extinct chandelier and the side-table, and took on the appearance of a human hand.

That hand, suspended in mind-air, seemed to be made of wax: a hyaline wax illuminated by an unknown mysterious light.

“Ranijesti’s hand,” whispered Sâr Dubnotal.

For a moment, the phosphorescent hand floated in the dense shadow of the green room.

The phalanges of the fingers were splayed, and emitted a subtle fluorescence. Around them, a nimbus of emerald light formed, a kind of green halo that grew and dissipated the ambient darkness.

Then the hand descended and paused immediately above the white sheet deposited on the side-table.

At that moment, the table rose slightly into the air and rotated, while the Hindu gong on the nearby desk rang sonorously three times.

“Ranijesti,” said Sâr Dubnotal, in a loud voice, “since you have been kind enough to respond to my medium’s appeal, permit me to ask you a question.

“I have been searching for a long time for a man named Tserpchikopf, a redoubtable malefactor and powerful hypnotist, who has so far evaded all my terrestrial sleuths, and whom I suspect of involvement in an incalculable number of crimes.

“In any case, he has tried to dispose of my servant Naini and attempted to kill me. He therefore merits the punishment I intend to inflict upon him, and I beg you, O Ranijesti, to facilitate the execution of my project. Do you know this Tserpchikopf? Can you tell me where he is hiding? Reply, I implore you, my old friend.”

Instantly, the luminous hand picked up the propelling pencil, and the sound of a rapid scribbling as heard, after which the hand picked up the sheet of vellum on which it had just written, and placed it in Sâr Dubnotal’s hands.

By the phosphorescent light emitted by the phalanges, the latter was able to read lines traced in red letters:

*No, I do not know Tserpchikopf, but I remember hearing his name pronounced by a soul in torment.*

“What is the name of the soul?”

*Pawn*, the hand immediately wrote on the sheet of velum that Sâr Dubnotal held out to it.

On reading the name, no longer traced in red letters but in flamboyant golden capitals, the Great Psychagogue could not suppress an exclamation of amazement.

Had “Pawn,” the Pawn that his investigators had been tracking unsuccessfully for so long, Tserpchikopf’s enigmatic accomplice, passed over from life to death, then?

In that case, hazard had served Sâr Dubnotal well, for it would be relatively easy to evoke the spirit of the dead man and obtain from him the information necessary to pick up the Russian’s trail.

In the domain of shades, Ranijesti enjoyed a certain power, and if Pawn was not naturally inclined to surrender his former associate’s secrets, the yogi’s double, in order to be of service to the Great Psychagogue, would be able to constrain him to do so by force.



Suddenly, however, Sâr Dubnotal's features darkened. A doubt had occurred to him. Was Ranijesti's Pawn really the same Pawn for which he was searching? Might he not be a mere namesake?

"Ranijesti," he said, "How long has this Pawn been dead? Would you please write?"

*Six years*, wrote the immaterial hand.

Sâr Dubnotal turned to Rudolph, disappointment causing him to smile involuntarily.

"I suspected as much," he said. "It would have been too fortunate. We're not used to so much complaisance on the part of chance, but if it's not the signatory of the dispatch that allowed Tserpchikopf to slip through our fingers, since the Pawn sought in vain by our investigators was alive three months ago, and probably still is, it nevertheless remains the case that the spirit mentioned by Ranijesti has had some relationship with Tserpchikopf. So, nothing is lost.

"No, Rudolph, nothing is lost, and we hold the conductive thread, believe me. I have an idea, which I'll divulge to you later. For the moment, let's attend to the most urgent matter, which is to ask Ranijesti one last question. It's necessary not to abuse his benevolence, and you know that our medium suffers greatly from experiments of this sort, which it's important to abridge as soon as possible..."

Waving the sheet of vellum, the Great Psychagogue went on:

"Thank you, Ranijesti. One more small item of information, and you may return to the extraterrestrial regions of our cherished and sublime Beyond. I should like to talk to Pawn, the soul in torment you have just indicated to me. Tell me whether that can be achieved."

There was a long silence, only troubled by the slight sound of the propelling pencil rung over the paper.

When the pencil stopped, the gong rang again. The curtains immediately drew apart, daylight entered the green room, and everything resumed its normal appearance.

As mysteriously as it had appeared, the yogi's hand had just vanished, leaving only a vaporous wisp that was promptly reabsorbed after having made contact with Annunciata's prostrate form.

At the same moment, the medium shuddered and sat up abruptly, viscous drool on her lips, her irises rolled back and her features convulsed as if by an epileptic fit.

Sâr Dubnotal sketched a few magnetic passes, which had the effect of extracting the medium from the crisis provoked by the prodigious tension that her nerves had suffered.

Then he ran to the table to take possession of the sheet of vellum.

The first impressions had been erased and had been replaced by another communication traced in red and gold letters, which did not take long to fade away in their turn.

It said:

*Yes, Sâr Dubnotal, my illustrious friend, you can evoke the spirit of Pawn, and I do not think I am saying too much in affirming that he will reply willingly to the questions you put to him, for his desire is precisely to confide his troubles to an honest human being.*

*The poor soul haunts a steamship serving as a ferry between Dieppe and Newhaven. I do not know the name of the ship. Inform yourself. Pawn's spirit will tell you why God has condemned him to that ordeal. Try to offer him relief, noble and merciful psychagogue.*

*Your faithful servant in the beyond, as once on the planet*

*Ranijesti*

Sâr Dubnotal put the piece of paper down, and said: "Quickly, Rudolph, make arrangements to accompany me immediately, with Annunciata. Don't forget to pack all the equipment I might need to operate during the journey."

It was then three o'clock in the afternoon.

At five o'clock, the two psychagogues and the Italian woman embarked at the Gare Saint-Lazare on the Paris-Dieppe express.