

## THE MYSTERIOUS COUNTESS SERKOFF

When my research into the history of Dorney Reach revealed a previous resident called Countess Serkoff, my curiosity was piqued. Who was she?

Her name was recorded as Countess Vera Elizabeth Henrietta Serkoff. The records show that, sometime between 1917 and 1923, she came to live as a tenant in the house called Willowcroft, in Dorney Reach Road, on the bank of the Thames. I soon discovered that she had been an author, publishing quite a range of material. But where had she come from?

It turned out that the countess was actually Scottish. Born Elizabeth Henrietta Swan in Greenock in 1858, I found her living with her parents and siblings in Scotland between 1861 and 1891. Sometime before 1899, she had become Countess Serkoff, and acquired the additional forename Vera. By 1901, she stated that she was a widow.

I have uncovered no evidence of her marriage, nor any sign of a Count Serkoff. The name seems pretty uncommon. An actor calling himself Ivan Serkoff was performing in provincial theatre in the Midlands in 1898. Nicolay Serkoff, a Russian doctor, passed through England on his way to the USA in 1913. Could either of these have been her husband? Did she travel abroad, perhaps to Russia, and marry there? She seems to have claimed some knowledge of Russia; the earliest published work I have found was an article on Russian child life which she contributed to a mother and baby magazine in 1899. Or did she simply reinvent herself as the widowed Countess Vera Serkoff, perhaps to help her succeed as an author? We will probably never know.

In 1901 and 1911, Vera was living in London with her younger sister Agnes Macdonald Swan, who worked as a stenographer. Agnes came to live with Vera in Dorney Reach. By



this time, she had already written for many publications. From 1903, her romantic short stories with titles like “The Infatuation of Phyllis” and “Rooted in Dishonour” were published in the weekend newspapers. A review of “Sir William’s patient” in The Ladies’ Pictorial in 1908 described it as *“a capital example of what a short story should be – well constructed and interesting”*. In 1909, she began writing children’s stories such as “Betty’s New Teddy Bear” and “Peggy and the Prince”, followed the same year by a serialised adult thriller, “In Desperation”.

1911 saw the publication of the book for which Vera became most renowned – “Paper Bag Cookery”. This set out detailed instructions and 200 recipes for cooking meat, fish, vegetables and all kinds of dishes inside paper bags within an oven. The book was widely publicised in the newspapers and can still be read online. Cooking in paper bags was, for a time, a popular trend; other authors also got on the bandwagon, and it has been suggested that Vera simply copied the recipes and techniques of pioneers

of the method. She had already penned another cookery book, called “The Visits of Doris; Cookery Hints to a Young Housewife, with a selection of specially prepared recipes for making dainty dishes suitable for everyday use”.

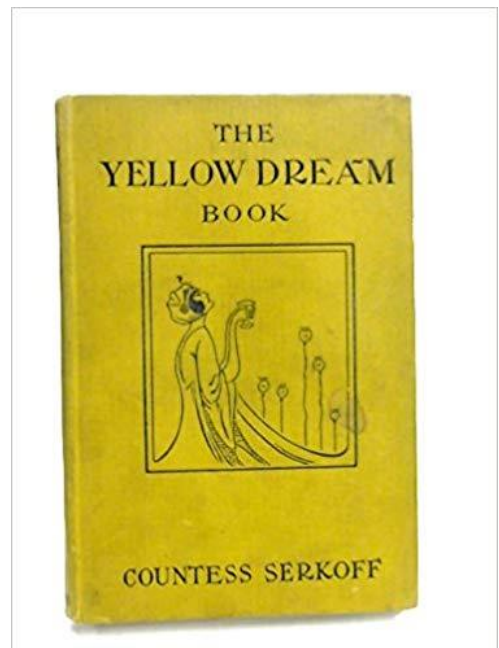
The following year, Vera felt moved to write to the editor of the London Daily News, in response to a letter about what was described as “the food problem”. Headlined “How the poor live”, the countess asserted that the advice people should eat lentils, beans and oatmeal, because they were nutritious and cheap, was pointless. The very poor wouldn’t eat them because they preferred the taste of bread and dripping, or fried fish and chips, which required little cooking; while the working man insisted on roast joints of meat. Vera went on to say, *“There lies before me now a book published in the beginning of the last century [i.e. early 1800s] advocating the use of lentils for the poor; advice as little followed then as now. The solution to the question is this: educate the children....”*

By 1914, the campaign for women to have the right to vote was well underway. Vera was a supporter of the suffragists, who differed from the suffragettes in pursuing peaceful means of protest. She was one of many prominent women suffragists who signed a memorial to the Prime Minister seeking to outlaw flogging as a punishment for men. She also wrote articles for “The Humanitarian”.

After 1919, Vera’s output of fiction seems to have declined, but she continued to produce non-fiction. 1920 saw the reprint in paperback of “The Visits of Doris”.

In 1926, when living in Dorney Reach, she published “The Yellow Dream Book: a new and reliable guide to the interpretation of our dreams”, and she contributed to an anthology on fortune telling.

The British Library catalogue entry for “The Yellow Dream Book” records Vera’s name as Vyera Serkova, and a book on Russian cooking notes that Countess Vera Serkoff, the author of “Paper Bag Cookery”, was also known as Vyera Syerkova. Was she presenting herself as of Russian origin? Who did her neighbours in Dorney think she was?



Vera and her sister lived at Willowcroft until her death in 1933. Agnes moved back to London and was described as a writer in 1939. She died unmarried in 1947.

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