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VALASCA:

A New Woman of the Olden Time.

BY

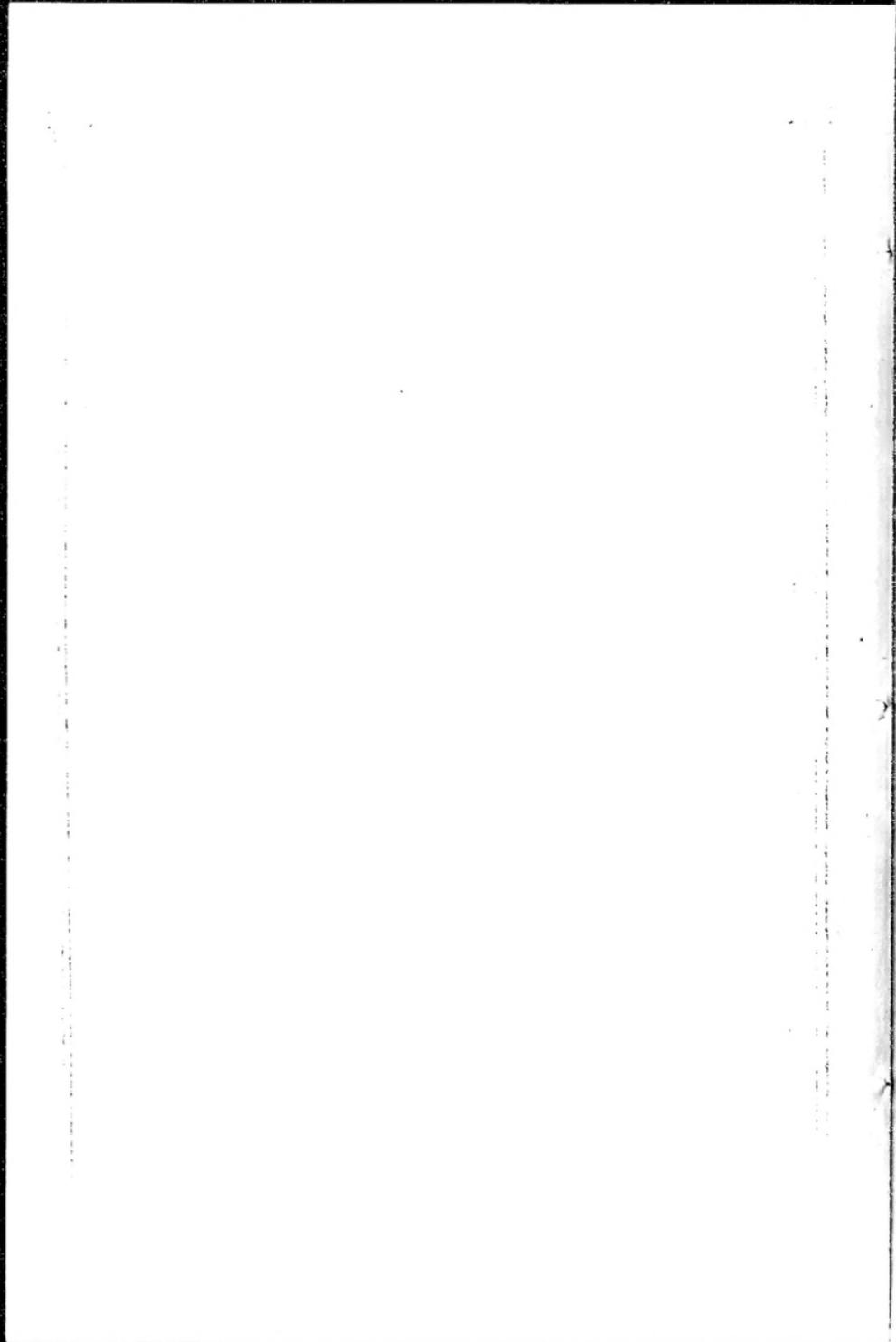
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VALASCA :

A NEW WOMAN OF THE OLDEN TIME

It is only comparatively recently that I became personally acquainted with the New Woman. Previously, what I suppose, what without imputations of senility or disrespect may be termed the Old Woman, had been the object of my raptures and the subject of my songs; for, an erotic bard was I "when my old hat was new," and the head it covered was newer and greener than it is to-day.

I am, although I have girded at Janet for years, her devoted paladin and romantic minstrel. An uncourtly candour has, perhaps too frequently, prompted me to drag heavy iron harrows across the weedy field of her faults and foibles. But, somehow, let the harrows tear ever so deeply, rending, rugging and riving till it would seem that hardly any of her virtues, and only a few rags of her vices are left her, she knows that I am her own true knight with the last drop of my black ink or red blood at her service. I love the Old Woman, and I love the New. I love the whole sex and never could, and never can, help it. Certain of the sex have shrugged and screamed at what one of them once denounced as my "red-hot poker style of fighting"; but, hard though my iconoclastic fight has been, it would have been impossibly hard if delicately nurtured and highly educated women had not extended to me their moral and material support. My blessing on the Old Woman, my benison on the New.

"Their tricks an' craft hae put me daft,
They've ta'en me in an' a' that ;
But, clear your decks, an' ' Here's the Sex' !
I like the jads for a' that.
" For a' that an' a' that,
An' twice as muckle's a' that,
My dearest bluid, to do them guid,
They're welcome till't for a' that !"

A few years ago, I had the pleasure of an introduction to one who was then at any rate a conspicuous New Woman. For, had she not publicly announced that, to wrest the rights and privileges of her sex from the masculine-gendered tyrants, the women of England should have recourse to the bayonet! The utterance, at the time, came in for an ungallant share of newspaper persiflage and derision. Of fairly bellicose temperament myself, I yearned to behold this Semiramis of Cockayne. In the early and salad days of Saladin, the sex had frequently been the cause of his heart being deeply pierced with the arrows of Cupid; and, now, he was possessed of a half daring, half terrified, desire to behold a Janet who, for the rights he had withheld from her, was prepared to transfix his diaphragm with a bayonet.

Through a lady friend, I obtained an introduction to mine enemy. I had half expected to be introduced to some wizened, weird and stalwart Hecate with a raucous voice that dirled the rafters, and with a handshake that would burst my finger-tips and stain with my detested masculine blood the blanch of her voluminous and majestic skirts. I was introduced, instead, to a young and fair-haired English gentlewoman, in appearance more suggestive of being a ministering angel when pain and anguish should rend the brow of us poor males than a bellicose hell-cat and flaming fury who was to stretch us stark on the battle-field with the cold earth drinking our unavenged gore and our death-glazing eye glaring up to the unpitied heaven. She indeed, O Virgil, suggested "arms and the man"; but the arms in which Hector enclasped Andromache, not the arms with which Patroclus vanquished Hector. I told the sweet, gentle and refined amazon something to this effect. Who knows, my words at random thrown may have borne seed in the heart of this young lady who scorned the needle and aspired to the bayonet. Who knows but I have saved my sex from overthrow, or even extermination? Be that as it may, since the date of my brief interview with her, the world has heard little or nothing of, and has ceased to tremble at, the name of the belle of the bayonet.

It is a far cry from Cockayne to Prague, and from the

end of the 19th to the end of the 7th century ; but, over the gulf of historic reminiscence, I make that cry, and link this belle of the bayonet with Valasca, a valorous if ill-starred predecessor. The story of Valasca is told by no meaner chronicler than Æneas Sylvius, afterwards Pope Pius the Second, in his history of Bohemia. Valasca was one of the maids of honour in the court of Queen Libussa. Libussa, who had succeeded her father, Crocus, on the throne of Bohemia, ruled for some years with ability and acceptance ; but her strict administration of justice eventually gave deep umbrage to one of the most powerful of her nobles who deemed that his importance and influence should have been sufficient to have indemnified him against punishment for his malefactions. Burning with hatred and thirsting for revenge, he raised the standard of revolt against his queen, urged that a queen was an absurdity and worse in a nation of hardy and warlike men, and protested that, during her reign, Libussa had persistently favoured her own sex and as persistently suppressed and insulted the entire male population of Bohemia.

Libussa, quite recognizing the danger which menaced her throne, put her woman's wits astleep to discover how best to cope with the perilous emergency. She summoned a great assembly of her people, and addressed them in conciliatory fashion and with marked discretion and diplomacy. In her peroration, she assured the Bohemians that, if they really desired a king, rather than a queen, she had no desire to reign over an unwilling people. "If you really desire to have a king," said she, "take my milk-white palfrey, caparison him in his most costly trappings, and lead him out to the plain. There, throw his bridle-reins over his neck, and let him go wherever he will—to the north, south, east or west ; but, ye of the nobility, follow him, and note his conduct with the most scrupulous attention. Follow him till you see him halt before a man feeding upon a table of iron. Bring that man, whoever he may be, back with you to my palace, and he shall be your king and my husband."

This proposal pleased the Bohemians mightily. They richly caparisoned the palfrey, as Libussa had directed,

let him wander at his own sweet will, but observantly followed him. After the horse had proceeded ten miles he reached the bank of the river Biell, where, in a field, a hind named Primislaus was ploughing. Before this Primislaus he whisked his tail and reared and capered and winned, apparently in a transport of equine delight. The embassy that had followed the horse now accosted the peasant and instructed him to mount into the saddle and accompany them back to the Bohemian Court to be their king and the husband of their queen, Libussa. "Delighted," replied Primislaus, "and a remarkably fine king for you, as well as a gallant husband for your queen; but the distance to the court is considerable, and I have not yet broken my fast." And he laid bread and cheese on his iron ploughshare for a table, and ate heartily. The Bohemians remembered what Libussa had said anent a man eating off an iron table, and felt that a mysterious Providence had directed them to the man who was destined to sway their sceptre and wed their queen.

Primislaus was brought into the presence of Libussa. There was a merry marriage bell, and all went happily for some years; then, there was a doleful funeral bell, for Libussa had died; and Primislaus alone was left to rule over Bohemia. Then the difficulties of King Primislaus began. His wife dead, the women of Bohemia protested that he no longer ruled justly, equitably and considerately over those of their sex. Their mouth-piece, their real evangelist, was the young, gifted and beautiful Valasca who had been the private secretary and the closest and dearest friend of Queen Libussa. No common or garden Janet this Valasca, but as beautiful as an angel and as clever as the devil. Bohemia would again find itself under the rule of petticoats, or she would know why—and she was not particular to a shade or scrupulous to a line when she had the dazzling design before her of establishing a gynocracy on the hills and through the forests of Bohemia.

In the depth of the primeval forest, and, at the gloomy noon of night, the leading malcontent women of Bohemia assembled in solemn secret at the behest of Valasca. To forestall possible detection and male interference, the

fair malcontents came armed to the teeth. There rose through the gloom the suppressed hum of feminine voices, for, even in dread and dire conspiracy, Janet cannot quite constrain her tongue to silence. Gloom, suppressed whispers and rustling amongst the undergrowth of the forest. Then, of a sudden, a flambeau was lighted. Its alternately red and yellow light flashed and flared over as romantically grotesque a spectacle as ever forest depth or cavern recess has witnessed in the working out of the weird, mad drama of man's life on earth. The women of Bohemia were there in their thousands; for, apparently, few had desired to take no notice of Valasca's summons; and, possibly, certain who desired to, dared not disregard it, for Valasca, like the queen under whom she had served, was known to be a sorceress of the most esoteric and awful character, prophetically conversant with the designs of heaven and the decrees of hell.

A colossal female, with her vizor raised, disclosing insanely wild eyes and a coarse, voluptuous, but fierce and cruel mouth that no man born of woman would desire to kiss, held aloft the gigantic flambeau, mounted on a tall shaft of pine. In front of this dread amazon was a great boulder, grey with lichen and green with moss. With supreme grace and dexterity, a singularly lithe and symmetrical figure ascended to the summit of the boulder, right under the glare of the flambeau. The suppressed female whispering became excited and threatened, at all peril, to burst into a cheer, for the figure of almost more than earthly beauty that had mounted the boulder was that of Valasca.

The splendid young rebel undid her helmet and laid it on the green moss at her feet. The rippling wealth of her golden hair streamed down her steel-clad back, while certain light, vagrant curls fell carelessly over her polished gorget and flashing breast-plate. Her sword-hilt literally blazed with gems, amid which was a fateful opal she had had as a dying gift from Queen Libussa, which was reputed to carry with it, at the will of the possessor, the most baleful magic spell, and which was reported to have been gifted to a remote ancestress of Libussa by the Arch Enemy of Mankind.

Valasca was beautiful ; but, her beauty was of the dignified, statuesque, and severe order, unredeemed by aught of sweetness and amiability ; her eye had the lustre of cold steel, and her mouth, though exquisitely chiselled, had in its delicate curves a latent reserve of scorn and bitterness. She raised her steel-gauntleted hand deprecatingly to silence the comparative clamour her mounting the boulder had excited. Then, with clear, resonant, but, at the same time, prudently restrained voice, she addressed the treason-stained ladies who, with their swords, were prepared to hack to pieces the throne of King Primislaus.

“Women of Bohemia, sisters, women born under the rule of that foremost champion of her sex, Queen Libussa, our assembling here under present circumstances, is not unattended with peril ; consequently, I will not detain you long. I should not have brought you here, but no building in all Bohemia was large enough to accommodate those I secretly summoned ; and, it was necessary I should, face to face, address you all, so that no shadow of doubt may be left as to our plans, and the concerted methods for carrying them out. I fear not, not even on the part of the basest of you, treachery and betrayal ; for, as you know, I learnt from our late lamented Queen many secrets of divination and magic ; and, hell is blessedness to the eternal torture that I can, *and shall*, make sure, waits upon her who betrays, or upon her who falters in carrying out the instructions with which she shall be charged. That ploughman, Primislaus, shall rule over us no longer, neither shall any of his accursed sex. Man is the born enemy of woman, even as the hound is the born enemy of the hare. By your swords, ladies, you *can* rule, and you *will*. But the males outnumber us.

“We must reduce their number before we venture to meet them on the field of battle, foot to foot, and blade to blade. I have a powder which Libussa taught me to produce, and enjoined upon me that, in the proper emergency, I should use. No man who, at sunset, ever partook of even the most minute particle of it, was alive at sunrise. A small quantity of that powder is, while I speak, being, by girls to whom I have assigned the task,

handed to each woman present. Ye women who are wives, your task is easy; and, eternally damned be she who does not wake to-morrow morning in the arms of a dead husband, in the cold, stiff arms of a dead enemy of your sex. And, ye sisters, who have brothers, and ye maidens who have lovers, ye mothers who have sons, see that to-morrow, before the sun has disentangled himself from the ruddy eastern horizon, ye have brothers, lovers, and sons no more. Swear it! Swear it!"

And a dull and deadly murmur of "We swear it!" "We swear it!" in a low but massive chorus rose from under oak and beech and pine. In a moment the great flambeau was extinguished; and, from the lurid contrast, darkness unutterable fell upon that conclave of women who groped their way homeward to sleep in the arms of dead men.

Janet will not readily consent to murder John, even to secure the emancipation and ascendancy of her sex. Valasca quite recognized this fact, but she met and counteracted it by administering charms and kataphilters to the women to nullify all aversion they might have to do to death their fathers, brothers, sons, lovers, and husbands. The women, so the record of Æneas Sylvius states, carried out their deadly and diabolical commission, and flew to arms to meet and vanquish such of the males as poison had not already laid low.

But, while this gynetic conspiracy was being hatched, King Primislaus had an ominous dream in which a virgin stepped forward and offered him a goblet of blood. His late queen had initiated him into many of the profound mysteries that everywhere touch faintly and dimly upon the warp and woof of man's life and destiny. He recognized the dream to be symbolical and prophetic, and resolved that, to prevent his drinking a cup of blood handed to him by Janet, it would be absolutely necessary for him by force of arms and drastic and ungallant means, to bring the rebel ladies to their knees. This he well knew to be no easy task, for the women of Bohemia were, at this period, a race of amazons, from the cradle upward trained to arms and feats of hardihood. Unlike the male military, they were not enervated by vice and dissi-

pation. They were exceptionally graceful, lithe, and active, full of dash and spirit, accomplished equestriennes, fearless huntresses, dexterous with the sword, deadly with the javelin, and implacably hostile to the male section of the human race.

Warned by the dream of the cup of blood, Primislaus prepared for immediate action ; and, when Valasca marched her amazons to under the walls of Prague, to her astonishment and chagrin, she found that her design had been anticipated and that Primislaus, at the head of an army of male warriors, was already there to receive her. With the fire and fury of a torrent of burning lava, Valasca and her Janets of the sword dashed down upon the vanguard of the army of Johns. Horse and man staggered back from the wild impetuosity of the charge. And, thought Primislaus, this is the first sip from the virgin's cup of blood, and I like it not. He retreated to the fortress of Vissagrada with the victorious blood and dust-covered Janets hacking and hashing at the rear. Victorious in the field, Valasca yet found the walls of Vissagrada impregnable to such siege-machinery as she could bring to bear against them. She raised the siege ; and, withdrawing to an almost inaccessible mountain rock, she built thereon a castle which was called Dievize, *dievize* being, in that day, the Bohemian word for a virgin. The mountain upon which this castle stood is still known as "The Mountain of Virgins."

John ruefully recognized that, unless he bestirred himself now, petticoats would be over him forever and ever. The army clamoured for Primislaus to lead them on to Dievize. But Primislaus had had another dream of the goblet of blood order, and he implored the troops to restrain their impatience as he had had a distinct premonition that if they marched against the Janets at the present juncture, they would, inevitably, march to red ruin. Cowardly ploughman, thought the valorous knights of Bohemia, to Pluto with your dreams and divinations ; without you, in spite of you, we will march upon Dievize.

And, march they did. With toil and peril, they clambered up the rocks, to attack the amazons in their fortress of Dievize. Valasca was ready for them and

accorded them a welcome to her castle, which, writhing in gore. many forgot instantly, and which those who survived remembered to the end of their lives. Before springalds and catapults and rams, and the siege ordnance of the age could be fairly brought into operation upon the Castle of the Virgins, the virgins after, with deadly effect, hurling molten lead, boiling pitch, and great masses of rock upon the besiegers, with Valasca at their head, made a sudden sortie of a fiery and desperate character.

Valasca, conspicuous in the impetuous van, was superbly mounted, her wealth of yellow hair streaming down her back as far as her jewelled sword-belt, her eyes blazing with the fire of battle, her sword circling round her head like the flash of the winter lightning, she led the charge, her amazons pressing close behind. They dashed in upon the male warriors before, owing to the suddenness of the attack and the irregular character of the ground, they had had time to form to resist the onset. There was the fierce skirl of the feminine cheer, mingled with the hoarser roar of masculine curses and execrations, a wild swaying of swords, plunging of steeds and clashing of spears. But only for an instant. The besiegers were driven headlong down the rocks they had so laboriously scaled ; and, rich carnival was provided for the eagles of the Bohmer Wald and the vultures of the Moravian Hills.

History has handed us down the names of several of the valiant who, in the battle storm, pressing close behind the war-charger of Valasca, won bloody laurels for their maiden brows. Æneas Sylvius gives the names, which are now but little heard of, owing to the enormous muster-roll of the brave which intervenes between their day and ours. But, may it gratify their *manes*, I reproduce their names here, after the lapse of twelve hundred years, that the New Women of to-day may call their children after them. The names of the specially valiant on the day the Castle of the Virgins was stormed, were : Malada, Nodea, Sveta, Vorasta, Radgea, Zastana, and Tristana. Ye fair and brave who preferred swords to distaffs and slaying men to wedding them, come forward and let me pin over the nipples of your high, white

bosoms such Victoria Cross, "for valour," as it is in the power of the *A. J.* to confer.

By their repulse on the rocks of Dievize, the male warriors of Bohemia became discouraged and demoralized ; and Valasca and her martial maidens carried fire and sword, almost to the gates of Vissagrada itself, the stronghold of King Primislaus. Years rolled by, and the ladies of the court and army of the victorious Valasca sank, one by one, into the grave, till the military strength of the virgins became perceptibly diminished. And none took the place of those whom death laid low. For no children were being born ; and the ghastly truth dawned upon Valasca that, with every death, there being no corresponding birth, her kingdom was departing from her. This *must* be averted. But, How ? Valasca's ingenuity was well nigh limitless, and her faculty as a sorceress penetrated the most awful arcana of being. But, how her ladies were to produce children outside the co-operation of the hated male sex transcended alike the limit of her inventiveness and the compass of her magic. No Mars as in the case of Rhea Sylvia, no ghost as in the case of Mary, was available. Spells and incantations, of an imaginable rather than a transcribable order, were resorted to by which the ladies lost their health and bade adieu to their beauty, but still remained as barren as the rock upon which their castle was built.

And the male warriors of Primislaus had their revenge. As death thinned out, birth recruited their martial ranks. For, denied their own Bohemian Janets, Janets from Bavaria, and from over the Carpathians, kindly obliged. And, more rapidly than the sexton clapped down the sod upon a grave, the midwife spread the blanket tenderly over a birth. And, maidens of Bavaria and Hungary who had hung matrimonial fire in their own country rejoiced exceedingly at the opportunity for their special talents and energies which had been opened up in Bavaria. And they set themselves with a will to producing subjects for King Primislaus.

Under the untoward circumstances, the queen and her retinue grimly resigned themselves to the inevitable. The hated male must be re-admitted to the chamber, but

never, never to the affections, of the ladies of the court and army of Valasca. Was ever such a sacrifice of personal feeling made for the public weal since the world began? A council was held to settle upon the terms with which the enemy should be approached. And it was hereby resolved

That, such of us as are equal to the performance, bear children to the subjects of King Primislaus.

That the male children which we may bear shall be delivered up to the government at Vissagrada.

That the female children which we may bear shall be retained by the government at Dievize, to wit, the Mountain of the Virgins.

That every male child, before being surrendered to the government at Vissagrada, shall have his right eye extracted, and the thumb of both the right and left hand amputated; so that it will not be possible for any male born in the dominions of Queen Valasca ever to wield sword or bow against his own mother and the ladies of the Mountain of the Virgins. As witness our seal and sign-manual to those presents, greeting.

After some diplomatic humming and hawing the proffered terms were accepted by the government at Vissagrada. And, under a flag of truce, a numerous embassy was despatched to Dievize to ratify them. Valasca, in a light, gauzy garment of sarcenet, open at the bosom, reaching to the knee, and resplendent with gems, mounted the steps of an extemporized throne which had been erected on the esplanade outside the castle, and with the cold dignity of the queen in conflict with the yielding tenderness of the woman, addressed the brilliant congress of male ambassadors: "Nobles, knights and gentlemen, I, in the name of the ladies of my kingdom bid you welcome to Dievize and to such hospitality as its halls afford. For this reception, however, I make free to advise you that you are not indebted to me and the ladies who aid and abet me in my councils, but to the edicts of an inexorable heaven. In this juncture, heaven has conquered for you, and the rewards of victory are yours. And——"

Months elapsed and the majority of the ladies were no longer lithe and athletic. They had abandoned their wonted indulgence in the fierce excitement of the gymnasium, the fencing-ring, the joust and the chase. They

had come to pass much of the day in sedentary employment and in listless reclining upon couches. The warlike ardour, and the capacity for physical exertion had, at least temporarily, departed. But it seemed that, from a propitious turn of fortune, they would not require, for the future, the martial elasticity and hardihood which had hitherto distinguished them. A despatch had reached them from Primislaus to the effect that, in favour of Valasca, he voluntarily surrendered all claim to the crown of Bohemia, being possessed of a desire to divest his brow of royalty's crown of thorns and return to the peace and quiet of the plough, which he regretted he had ever abandoned. "I received the crown from a woman, to a woman will I render it back," said the gallant and magnanimous King Primislaus. Aud, he requested that Valasca should despatch a battalion or two to Vissagrada to take formal possession of the fortress and the throne.

A detachment of lady cavaliers from Dievize were despatched in the terms of Primislaus' invitation. They were not the lissome and agile amazons who erst had been at once the delight and terror of their enemies. Each draped in a long, loose mantle that left her form indefinite, sat on her saddle like a sack of salt. The drawbridge was let down and the portcullis raised, and, amid the jangling of joybells, the blast of bugles, the thunder of drums, ringing cheers, and every ostentatious evidence of welcome, the cavalcade filed into the castle of Vissagrada.

In the evening the ladies from Dievize sat down to a magnificent banquet which had been spread in their honour. At the close of the repast, King Primislaus who had done the ladies the honour to take his seat at the head of the festive board, with his dagger-hilt, struck the table three times to indicate that he demanded silence. Silence secured, a heavy golden goblet in his hand, filled to the brim with the richest Burgundy, he rose to propose the toast of the evening, "The health of Valasca, from this night forward, sole and undisputed Sovereign of Bohemia." He had spoken for a few minutes when, at a sudden, with a wild, derisive laugh, he hurled the goblet and its contents to the roof of the banquetting hall. In a moment, the arras all round the vast apart-

ment lifted ; and, from behind it, rushed hundreds of armed men. In an instant, over a wild medley of overturned tables, broken benches, and scattered vessels and viands, swords flashed, axes swung, and daggers stabbed fast and fiercely. A quarter of an hour of wild cries and thudding blows ; and then, all was silent. Down on the rush-strewn floor amid the shattered furniture and trampled food, lay the guests in every distorted and horrible position into which ferocious massacre had flung them. Almost all were dead ; but a gurgling groan rose from several which gave evidence that they still breathed and were being drowned in the blood on the floor, in which the murderers and their king now stood to the ankles.

Little remains to be told. The power of Valasca was broken. Primislaus lost no time in hurling the military strength of his kingdom against the walls of Dievize. Riding a spear length in advance of her bravest, Valasca made a brilliant sortie in the attempt to cut her way through the ring of steel that cinctured her fortifications and cut off her supplies. Her whilom dash and spirit had no whit deserted her. The spirit was willing ; but, the flesh was weak. She had, during the last month, had to let out her sword-belt by several holes ; and the blade which had been the terror of Bohemia lacked its quondam lightning speed and lethal precision. In the thickest and deadliest of the fight she fell, covered with wounds, and the flower of her army, suffering under the same disability that had affected the energies of their queen, fell fighting, impotently, but devotedly, round the corpse of her they had known, adored, and loved. Primislaus ordered that his fallen enemy should have no burial, but be left to the beak of the raven and the fangs of the wolf. The males remorselessly butchered the enemy whom their own embraces had rendered comparatively impotent. On the night of that day of slaughter, the moonbeams fell, white and peaceful, on the folds of the royal standard of Primislaus as it streamed over the battlements of Dievize. And, one of the strangest, wildest, and least-known tragedies of the world had closed.

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