

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE



VOLUME V

NUMBER 6

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 317 Baldwin Building, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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The Witch Of Kravetz

by

Michael V. Simko

ON A newly constructed rostrum, publicly exposed to the devouring eyes of the populace, stood the famed beauty of Kravetz. With bowed head she submissively waited. A slight wind played havoc with her loosened flood of dark hair. The women saw it. They noted its abundance and glorious luster. Their hearts were sinful with envy.

Her divine form with its sensuous lines was suggested by a single wrapper that inadequately covered her quivering body. Like a martyr saint, she calmly expected her destruction. Slowly, inevitably, the clock approached the hour of noon.

IN THE southern part of Russia, some hundred kilometers back from the Black Sea, lies a fertile expanse of land, sparsely populated. As far as the eye can reach roll verdant pasture lands and arable ground.

This pleasant and productive territory of Kravetz was once under the dominion of a Count Daramkoff. Sacreligious and tyrannical. Daramkoff ruled his peasants with the hand of a despot. But it is unkind to speak evil of the dead. And Daramkoff is dead.

The district with its scattered, low, whitewashed huts, acres of waving rye and rich brown tillable earth,

pleased the eye as one let it survey the landscape, until it rebelled at the incongruous appearance, in this scene of contentment and harmony, of a small lake. Its stagnant water was putrid and infested with disease-carrying mosquitoes. A stunted growth of trees bordered this lake on one side. The opposite border presented a huge excavation, jagged piles of heavy stones, loads and loads of lumber and countless barrels of hardened mortar.

It was apparent that the erection of some edifice had been suspended. The confused growth of weeds, the decayed appearance of the stacked lumber, the wild grass struggling up between the rocks, the hardened mounds of earth, the deep cellar foundation crowded with underbrush and saplings, all indicated that this chaotic condition was not of recent years.

The natives tell tourists about this weird section. The region is haunted by a woman. Men are her chief victims. Echoing across the land come from the unfinished mansion the agonizing cries of this woman. Sometimes she sings. It is hard to resist listening to her song. The charm of her voice at night, like a siren's at sea, has lured many a young man to his death in the murky water of the lake.

None feared those nocturnal spectral sonatas more than Count Daramkoff and an aged, half-crazed man called Simeon Lavkovich. Of the latter it has been said that, unable to control himself, one night he roamed about the ghostly premises until he was positive the voice closed its deathly song with his name. In a sibilant whisper it trailed off "S-s-s-simeon, S-s-s-simeon".

Peasants found the man the following morning. He was exhausted. His head was white. He lay in a frightful fit on the edge of the lake not far from the neglected foundation. His eyes were terrible to see. He mumbled insanely, calling over and over a name that sounded like Lavinia.

They dragged him to his feet. His head fell forward. His bulging eyes saw, fastened to his coat lapel, strands of beautiful dark hair. He tore away the raven threads and his face was like putty. Cold drops of perspiration stood out all over it. He collapsed like a hysterical woman.

From that day, Simeon Lavkovich did not know his own mind. He tramped the streets. He ate whatever he found, in the gutters, in back yards. His life was a dog's life, a dog without a master. People pointed after him. The children, quick to grasp such things, found him a subject for their calls and ridicule. They jeered at him. They threw stones after him. They tapped their heads significantly. They stuck to his heels as he fearfully sought escape.

This was a pitiful reverse. The illiterate peasants knew nothing of Simeon before he came to their village. They could not know that once he mingled with Moscow's best society. It was better that they were in the dark about this fact.

SIMEON LAVKOVICH had been called to Kravetz from Moscow by Count Daramkoff to design a suitable palatial residence on the border of the

lake in the count's estate. Simeon had gained enviable popularity as an architect. He was a carefree, dashing young man with blazing brown eyes and a defiant, stiff little mustache. He had the deportment of a prince, the intellect of a genius and the tongue of a poet.

The débutantes lavished their affections on him. And he was a fit subject. No girl could resist Simeon. Pompous matrons contrived to ensnare him. Simeon was considered a favorable matrimonial subject.

Simeon was not only an architect. He pursued this vocation for monetary reasons only. He liked to be poetic. He flavored all his actions with a peppering of romance. In his heart he believed some divine goddess would one day lay her soul at his feet. These pampered, idle, luxury-loving ladies nauseated his quixotic temperament. Their gold was venom in his flood of sentimentality.

Into this pool of disfavor came Daramkoff's opportune request. Simeon did not wait long to make reply. The social requirements of court life had gradually become so abhorrent to him that he gladly accepted the count's offer. With little delay and with abbreviated adieu to his many friends, Simeon set out for Kravetz, where a temporary home was erected for his exclusive use during the building of the count's mansion.

Simeon gave himself wholly to the task confronting him. He undertook the work with a zeal that surprised him. The new surroundings exhilarated him. He loved the simple peasants. He basked in the respect these naive illiterates tendered him, "a gentleman from the big city."

Fashion did not dictate here. He dressed as comfort suggested. No formality soured his carefree existence. He exulted in this new freedom. And he had foolishly caged himself in a city of big buildings and chained

his days to a program of social activity!

The excavation was completed and work was rapidly progressing on the foundation of the mansion when Simeon Lavkovich first met the famed beauty of Kravetz.

LATE one afternoon, Lavkovich galloped away on a wiry Cossack steed. He rode out of the domain of Kravetz and broke into a wild canter across the barren steppes adjoining the district. This limitless expanse enthralled him. The silence and magnitude of the rolling land was appalling. He rode over this waste with no regard for the time of day.

When the sun threatened to disappear below the horizon and an awesome dusk furtively crept over the land, Simeon brought up his horse with an ejaculation. His heart began to experience a fearsome constriction. How should he turn? How was he to be guided on his return?

He turned his horse and let the beast choose his own road. It was a long and lonesome ride, through a blackness that enveloped him like a cloak. His fatigued horse refused to respond to entreaties, spurs or whip, but staggered ahead with head almost reaching the ground. The silence of the steppes filled the man with unaccountable terror.

Simeon's strained eyes at length detected a distant glimmer of lights. He exclaimed like a truant boy. His heart pulsed happily. He begged his horse to quicken his pace. The patient steed must have sensed the proximity of humanity and possible prospects of food and rest, for he picked up his head, raised his ears and put new vigor into his exhausted limbs.

Before this lonely cottage Simeon drew rein. A haggard crone came in reply to his repeated knocking. She eyed him suspiciously. His plea did not interest her. She hardly waited for him to finish. He followed her.

She silently led the way down a dimly lighted hall and motioned him to sit down in the adjoining room.

The man stood stupefied on the threshold. His amazed eyes surveyed the colorful landscapes on the walls, the unique draperies, the unexpected splendor of the furnishings. The sight of a grand piano was enough to astonish him—all this artistry in a peasant's hut!

He stepped into the center of the room, the better to observe a painting. The rustle of skirts and the slightest breath of a heavenly aroma startled him. He sensed another's presence in the room.

He turned slowly and almost gasped in dumfounded adoration. He wanted to fall on his knees in reverence. The blood rushed to his head. It pounded in his temples. His tongue was chained. The holy charm of her whirled him into another sphere.

Now he realized that he had fallen under the divine eyes of the noted "enchantress of the steppes". They called her that in Moscow. He had heard men speak of her. He had heard nobles rave over her. The unequalled charm of this woman was history. Men had offered fabulous riches to her. She had spurned them.

She stood tall and majestic in the doorway, the velvet portières parted by hands of a grace and whiteness he had never before beheld. An abundance of black glossy hair was coiled on her regal head. There was that white sheen to her forehead, neck and shoulders that recalled newly washed marble. In her adorable lips was that moist, pink fullness with a petulance that craved pressure from another's lips. In her eyes, scarcely glowing through half closed lids, smoldered the soft amorous fire that had seared the heart of many a noble, and would turn the heart of a monastic.

It had already wrought destruction with Simeon. He was shamefully disconcerted in her queenly presence.

"I am Lavinia Turgeno. Would you wish anything of me? My servant is dumb. She could make no answer to you."

It was a voice worthy of her white throat. Once, in a cathedral in Petrograd, Simeon had heard an organ. Her voice was like that, heavenly harmony.

At Moscow, Simeon was an intrepid youth. The glamor of jewels, the eyes of vain women, the prestige of titled names were only molehills to the fearless youth. Here, isolated from all social revelry, an unaffected, unadorned woman made him feel like a penitent schoolboy in the august presence of a new teacher. He recalled his dust-covered attire, his disheveled hair, and a new wave of despair and agitation played havoc with him.

"My servant will give you to eat. You must be hungry. The way to Kravetz is long. It is best you lodge here for the night. She will look to your comfort. Good night."

She was gone. There was an ebbing rustle and a vanishing atmosphere redolent of roses, and he was left alone. He swallowed with ease again. His heartbeat gradually subsided to normal. He wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"You fool. You square-headed idiot," he hatefully denounced himself just as soon as he realized his tongue was at his own disposal once more. "Can't you talk to a lady when you see one?"

The servant interrupted his soliloquy. He followed her. The savory table reminded him of his neglected stomach. He set to it avidly. But not for long. There was no relish in his eating. Her visionary presence made everything else but looking at her distasteful.

The crone showed him to his room. He was tired. He lay in bed. He could not sleep. The darkness was ablaze with her face. Lavinia—

Lavinia! Would she appear at breakfast? He could not leave without one more sight of her. Lavinia! Who could have selected a more suitable name? Her eyes would enslave all Moscow. Gad! If he could bring her out! Lavinia! A wonderfully charming name.

From that memorable night Simeon's heart knew no peace. He loved the lady with a madness that recognized no bounds. Like every other man, he fell to wondering why such a charming woman should seclude herself, and with a dumb servant live the life of a recluse. Why had she refused in marriage such men as had come to her from marble halls, and laden with purses heavy with gold? She was a lady with heart of stone, they said.

Simeon came again without being invited. He came many times. This was not to her liking. But Simeon was persistent. And Simeon had brown eyes and a stiff little mustache. She liked to see his mouth twitch. He smiled often and showed wonderful teeth.

Despite her aloofness and coldness toward him, Simeon Lavkovitch would not be discouraged in his pursuit of her heart. One night, after he had said good-night, she came to the door. For a long time they looked into each other's eyes. A fearful fire burned in Simeon. A surge of passion possessed him. He refused to steel himself against it.

He dropped his hat. He caught her to him. He pressed her fervently against him. His mouth sought hers. She resisted. She surrendered. She melted in his embrace. She felt his lips tight against hers. Her head fell back. A thick strand of hair fell away from her right ear. It exposed a dark spot, not as large as a ten cent piece, just below her ear.

Lavinia started. She struggled out of his arms. Her face was crimson.

She hurriedly tried to arrange the truant strand. Simeon only laughed. He bent over her and kissed the discoloration.

The days hurried along. The foundation for the count's palace was nearing completion. It was almost time to lay the cornerstone.

Lavinia found her barrier crumbling. Long had she kept it impregnable to dukes and princes. A dashing, impecunious architect had undermined it. She could not repel the attention of Simeon any longer. She admitted that his impulsive manner and tempestuous lovemaking captivated her. She laughed when he told her that he would bring the priest to marry them.

They were not empty words. Simeon came one afternoon. The priest was with him. Lavinia turned white. Her voice trembled.

"Simeon Lavkovich—I can't—oh, I can't marry you—I can't—I can't!"

"But surely, my adored one, you will not refuse me! My love for you is like a fire. It is eating my soul away, and if you will not accept me I shall most certainly die of its burning. Tell me, at least, why it is you remain so cold to the blazing adoration of my love."

"Yes, yes, I—I will tell you." She wavered, then impetuously continued, "Oh, Simeon, I love you—"

The words filled him with a wild joy. He crushed her hard against him. His fervid kisses covered her neck and cheeks. Long they clung to the fullness of her lips. Those words had never before left her mouth. They fed the fire in his soul.

"Oh, my blessed one, my Lavinia, say no more. Come, let us be married. And, after the ceremony, if you wish, you can tell me what is troubling you. I am wild with happiness. You have made me insanely happy, my Lavinia."

He rushed out to call the priest and two friends who acted as witnesses.

The charming Lavinia sank into a chair. She struggled to hold herself together. It was a severe trial, this marriage ceremony. Her only words to him were, "And Simeon, you'll not reproach me, you shall love me for all time—always, even though—"

"Hush, my dearest, even in eternity I shall adore you."

So they were married.

That day Simeon Lavkovich's star fell. He became a different man. Some said he had lost his reason. People marveled at the cruel reverse Lavkovich displayed. The serfs, a superstitious lot, had always doubted Lavinia. Now they became more bold and voiced their belief. Surely, the beautiful Lavinia had bewitched Simeon Lavkovich.

The young man began to drink heavily. His behavior terrified the natives. His despotic commandeering over the workmen became unbearable. They protested to Daramkoff. He listened, and came down to watch Simeon at work. In another day, Simeon was replaced by another capable man to complete the mansion.

THE day for laying the cornerstone of the count's castle arrived. Krayetz and the surrounding country long anticipated this event, chiefly because a barbarous custom was to be enacted. It was the burying alive of a member of the female sex to fulfil the belief that "the living, quivering body of a girl would knit together the walls of the great building and preserve it against disaster in the future."

Count Daramkoff suggested that one day be devoted to volunteering. In the event a virgin did not offer herself as the victim of this sacrifice to a mass of stones, a married woman would be acceptable. On the other hand, if no volunteers appeared, all women of the village would be set in line and a committee would select the fairest ten. From this final group, the fatal choice would be made.

The woman must possess beauty without a blemish. Her condition must not be impaired by any significance of unhealthiness. It was believed a diseased person would bring sickness and misfortune to those living in the mansion.

Prior to the dreaded day of selection, after volunteers failed to present themselves, it became rumored that Simeon Lavkovich had offered his beautiful wife, Lavinia. She submitted herself as the subject of this sacrilegious practise. Such news was incredible. That the most charming woman of Kravetz should resign herself to such an ignoble fate when she could have lived in royal halls! And why should Simeon make such an offer to favor the man who had discharged him and pronounced him unfit to complete the work on his home?

The committee appointed by the count to choose the unfortunate woman gladly accepted Simeon's wife. They little relished picking out a girl for such a dreadful death. They wished their hands clean of blood and gladly agreed to Simeon's one condition: that instead of examining her they take his word for it that her beauty was without a mark and that her splendid appearance vouched for her robustness.

On the appointed day, late in August, long before sunrise, the people from far and near poured into Kravetz. The adjoining towns and hamlets had heard of the event. Such an affair came once in a lifetime. It attracted people from distant places. Every buttress, pinnacle, porch, window and roof that offered a point of vantage was congested with men and women and babbling children.

At a quarter of 12 the procession passed about the foundation. Lavinia was in the lead, sparsely clad in a wrapper that clung to her shapely body. The retinue consisted of the count, his family and intimate friends. They sat themselves on a be-

decked stand while a guard assisted Lavinia up a pair of stairs to a rostrum erected for this special purpose.

She was the cynosure of all eyes. Her quiet composure appalled the multitude. The abundance of her thick, long hair fell over her shoulders down to her waist. Her queenly head was now modestly bowed. She felt the ruthless eyes of an avaricious throng searing her body.

The clock lacked a minute before the execution of this atrocious act. A silence covered Kravetz. The beating of hearts was almost audible in the oppressive stillness. A feverish glare came into the eyes of a tense crowd. Women clung to supports with nervous fingers.

One man, in an isolated corner on a housetop, was on the verge of collapse, but the seething fire of vengeance urged him to keep his place and witness the outcome of his craftiness. Simeon had reached the hour of his hateful triumph over the woman who had played him wrong and the man who had discharged him.

The voice of conscience hummed in his ear. In vain it whispered: "But was it not your own will that precipitated you into this marriage? Had she not warned and resisted you? Your ear was deaf to all she would say."

He refused to listen. He hardened himself against this ordeal by having frequent recourse to a bottle hid in his coat. In maudlin tones he incoherently mumbled something about beauty and health. He would bring in the count's name. Then he would laugh in a way that was not pleasant to hear.

THE time had come. The count's arm was raised. The multitude did not breathe. The arm was motionless. A heartaching second followed. Then the hand fell. It was the signal.

A cord attached to Lavinia's single piece of raiment was drawn. With a swish, the wrapper left the girl. It was an awful moment. The charm of her body was exposed to prove to the people that she was sound and beautiful.

The frightful sight of her nudity stunned the spectators. Women screamed and covered their faces with their aprons. Men turned away. A wild cry went up to heaven. The nobility stood up in a body. Daramkoff swore shamefully. Before he could remonstrate, before his agonized cry, "Away, away with her!" had left his mouth, the sacrifice was completed.

His words came too late. By some misapprehension, the rostrum was prematurely destroyed. It crashed into the excavation ready for it and the suspended giant buckets suddenly precipitated tons of earth upon the body of beautiful Lavinia, smothering her last and only cry. Some said it was a prayer for mercy. Some said it was a burning curse.

Simeon hid himself. His foresight had selected a place several days previous.

The amazed multitude dispersed in fearful awe. They blessed themselves repeatedly. The women affirmed their suspicions. Like fire spread the gossip, "Truly she was a witch."

In the brief time of exposition the populace well saw Lavinia's body. The skin was that of a leopard's. Ugly, irregular black spots disfigured the whiteness of her body. And the naive peasants called it witchcraft.

The physician in attendance, a guest of the count, later explained to Daramkoff: "The woman was suffering a condition known as melanosis, in which the skin becomes abnormally crowded with dark pigmentation. In some cases the entire body is covered with this hideous discoloration. Save for the spot below her ear, Lavinia was fortunate to be able to keep her condition a secret, except, of course, from the man who married her."