

**THE BINDWEED: A
ROMANTIC NOVEL
CONCERNING THE
LATE QUEEN OF SERVIA**

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The Bindweed: A Romantic Novel Concerning the Late Queen of Serbia by Nellie K. Blissett

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THE BINDWEED

A Romantic Novel +
concerning the late Queen of Servia

BY

NELLIE K. BLISSETT

AUTHOR OF "FROM THE UNSOUNDED SEA" AND
"MOST FAMOUS LOBA"



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*Let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings:
How some have been depos'd, some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have depos'd,
Some poison'd by their wives, some sleeping kill'd,
All murder'd.*

—SHAKESPEARE.

THE BINDWEED

CHAPTER I

LIANE ran up the stairs singing. The stairs were long and steep, in one of those high old houses that overhang the two rushing rivers—one from the East, one from the West—which, mingling, rush together for a while in the city where East and West mingle strangely on the frontier of a world of dreams. Below, the two rivers flow quietly side by side; above, gray and red roofs and jutting, perilous windows make a picturesque confusion of color and form, and black-haired, wild-eyed women look out across the hurrying waters, calling to each other from house to house and balcony to balcony in a strange tongue.

The house where Liane lived was a little more tumble-down than its fellows, a little more gray and red and weather-beaten, a little more inclined to let in the rain in winter, and the sun in summer; but in Salitza all houses do this more or less. It had balconies looking across the river, and Liane had grown a great pink rose in a broken pot on that smallest, highest balcony of all where the poor Markovitch family had their tiny flat under the red tiles—fierce old Stepan,

and mischievous Pavlo, the eldest boy, and little Mikhail, the youngest, and Liane herself, who spent her days in the big French shop on the Boulevard Mikhail II, called poetically—and perhaps not without a certain amount of truth—the “Paradis des Dames.” Liane was young and pretty and miraculously quick of finger and eye, with something of the unerring, instinctive taste of her French mother, whom Stepan Markovitch had married from the very same establishment nearly twenty years ago.

The fierce old corporal of Royal Guards, with his long mustache and martial air and the very small pension, not too regularly paid, which was his reward for years of service to an exacting master, lounging one day in the sun on the Boulevard Mikhail II, had seen the little French girl go tripping down the street and made up his mind with a promptitude characteristic of his race. Next day the stout Parisian who kept the shop received a visitor who frightened her terribly until she made out his errand. Then she sent for little Elise Caron and presented to her a suitor whose very appearance would have sent most girls of her age and upbringing into hysterics. But little Elise Caron, daughter of the most frivolous, if also the most tragic, city in the world, felt the fascination of the savage, the unexplored, the unknown. Perhaps she had in her, developed in an unusual degree, that passion for experiment, for exploration, which all women have who are gifted with any imagination at all. She married Stepan

Markovitch, corporal—retired—of the Guard, and went to live in the high house over the river, and the Boulevard Mikhail II knew her no more.

It was a strange marriage enough, this union of the East and the West, of two people who could hardly speak the same tongue without making a hundred mistakes; perhaps for that reason it succeeded as many marriages do not which are entered into under apparently much more favorable circumstances. Elise never regretted the day on which old Stepan saw her running down the street. She died when her third child was born, leaving Stepan inconsolable; and Liane, gay and quick as herself, went to the "Paradis des Dames" in her place.

Liane was a favorite in the shop. If a more than usually captious customer was to be charmed or cajoled, it was Liane who was called for to do it; if a bow would not come right, or a stupid apprentice had blundered, it was Liane who was in request to repair the error; if a hat had to be sent home in a hurry, it was Liane who could be trusted to run all the way and not linger to gossip with a friend. To Liane fell, in consequence, many of the little privileges of her kind—a few yards of ribbon here, a shop-soiled blouse there, a hat which would not sell but which looked charming set off by Liane's dark eyes and rosy cheeks—trifles which make the happiness of such unimportant little probationers of fortune, and make, sometimes, their fates as well. Perhaps it was in that very hat which

would not sell that a certain rather ugly German in a blouse marked with machine oil and grease saw her running along the Boulevard Mikhail II and lost his soft heart to her at once and for ever, after the sentimental and dashing fashion of his race.

But all this time Liane is waiting on the stairs.

In reality, it took her hardly a moment to dash up them and precipitate herself into the little sitting-room. Pavlo was astride a chair, whistling a wild country dance; little Mikhail was on his knees before the stove making the coffee which their French mother had taught them all to make and love. Pavlo stopped in the middle of his whistling and looked around as his sister came in.

"Late, as usual, mademoiselle," he said in French. "Have you been catching an officer of the Guard for our supper?"

"An officer of the Guard!" She fell on little Mikhail, and with the skill born of long practice, caught up the coffee-pot before it boiled over. "What use should I have for an officer of the Guard, silly boy?"

"You might marry him, and get him to make Mikhail and me generals," suggested Pavlo practically. "Then we could all live in a big house on the Boulevard Valitzine and have meat all the year around and fish on Sundays. Liane, go out at once and catch that officer of the Guard!"

"I am going to have my supper first," she laughed. "Afterwards we will see about it."

Little Mikhail fell back on the rug, and looked up reproachfully at his brother.

"Liane is going to marry Fritz, and not a horrid, stuck-up officer with spurs and waxed mustaches," he announced.

Liane turned round with the coffee-pot in her hand.

"Fritz!" she flashed. "Fritz! Do you think I am going to do anything so foolish? Why, Fritz hasn't a penny in the world, and never will have."

"Wrong, mademoiselle: Fritz has just been made foreman of the works down the river—the new ones. Oh, Fritz is not a *parti* to be sneered at now, I can tell you. Fritz is a young man with a future, and if you are wise you will think twice before you refuse him. And he's about the best fellow in Salitza," added Pavlo with sturdy loyalty.

"Fritz is a dear," chimed in little Mikhail from his corner, whither he had retired to nurse the cat.

"And I'm to marry him because you and Mikhail are silly about him!" Liane cried. "Do you think I am so ugly I couldn't find anyone else?"

"Vain little girl!" mocked Pavlo. "I never said you were not quite pretty enough to marry a king, did I?"

Liane laughed, soothed by the implied compliment.

"I had my fortune told the other day," she said, "and do you know it was just that."