

FEDORA

BY VICTORIEN SARDOU

(Continued)

The room was not darkened, but the light was subdued, as it entered by being brought through delicately tinted curtains. And everything in it was warm and coaxing. Scented wood burned on the hearth, a snow-white Angora cat slept on a rug, curled up before the blaze, soft folds of curly drapery caught the eye where, pillows of down nestled in every angle. And in this dim Fedora would meet Loris if he came. If he came! It would he come? To tell herself in the morning when the time was some hours away, that it would not matter, that if it were not now it would be later; but as the afternoon came and wore slowly on, she could not sit still and think. She spent the time pacing up and down the boudoir where she could not hear her own foot-fall till at last she reminded herself of a panther.

Then she laughed and sat down, her cheek upon her hand, and waited. If it could only be all action; if the warfare could be constant, and to the death. Ah, well, the beginning was always the slowest.

The afternoon dragged horribly, and Fedora had begun to tell herself that he would not come, when Marka came to her, and said:

"The Count Loris Ipanoff!"

Then Fedora looked up slowly, and smiled at the girl.

"Ask him to come here."

"Here!" ejaculated Marka, involuntary, and then looked abashed.

"Do you think it would be improper?" asked Fedora, smiling at her.

"Oh, no."

"Ask him to come here."

Marka left, and Fedora stood up, and gazed at herself in the long mirror. Then she let herself sink into a fauteuil with as much abandon as was compatible with propriety, and there remained until a voice aroused her.

"May I enter? I was bidden come here."

Then she did not start in any confusion, but rose slowly, smiling with frank pleasure, and answered:

"Oh, come in. Truly, I did not think you would come, though I did you the honor to hope that you would. Yes, I had you brought here, because I am like one of those tropical animals that is always at its best in its own jungle. This is my jungle. Have you brought the score, and were you right?"

He drew a great breath as he handed her a piece of music, and there was a singular expression in the usually serene eye as it reluctantly dropped before hers.

CHAPTER X

Loris Ipanoff had watched the Princess Fedora as she left the salon of the Countess Olga, with a sensation that was quite new in his experience.

There was a singular mixture of harshness and scorn depicted on his face as he followed her supple figure out of the room with his eyes, and he turned with a fierce suddenness when Lasinsky said to him:

"A beautiful creature!"

He resented the remark for some reason, and it was on his lips to say something contemptuous in answer, but he checked the inclination, and answered, shortly:

"Yes."

Then he realized that he had been betrayed out of his usual calm, and became conscious of a strange disorder of his senses. The scornful curl of his lip deepened, and, taking advantage of the custom of the salon, he turned on his heel, and left.

The countess had not noticed his disturbed appearance, but she had seen him go, and was disappointed. Lasinsky turned to her with a malicious smile, as if divining her feelings, and said:

"I fancy it is dangerous to play the accompaniments for the princess."

"Why?" demanded the countess before she could check the word.

"Oh, you would not ask if you had seen the face of Ipanoff just now. Cupid's arrow evidently hurts, but he has gone home to pluck it out."

The countess laughed, though it cost her an effort.

"Perhaps you see out of an eye diseased," she said, with a covert meaning that stung him into silence.

There was possibly more truth in what Lasinsky said than even he believed. At any rate, Loris Ipanoff hurried out into the street anathematizing himself for the folly he had been guilty of; scolding himself for his weakness.

Why should he tremble at the mere chance touch of a white hand? Why should he turn hot and cold at the glance of a blue eye? Why lose his senses because the breath of a woman fanned his eyes? Why should his blood leap in his veins because the flesh of a woman warmed his cheek?

But even as he asked himself the questions, upbraidingly, the memory of the little hand thrilled him. He could feel again the breath on his eyes, and he covered them with his hand. He could see once more down, down into the blue depths of those wonderful eyes. And before him, in all her undulating, palpitating sensuousness, he could see her still.

Such madness had never overtaken him before, and he could not comprehend it. It was so sudden, so unexpected, yes, so unwelcome. Like poor Saint Anthony, he could not rid himself of the vision, and his imagination ran riot with it, till he began to think he would go mad in earnest.

To think that he, of all men, should give way to an infatuation like this! Ah, bah! he would not do it.

And, telling himself this fifty times, he often reverted to the picture of her, as she stood by his side, her vibrating voice playing upon the chords of his heart, her glowing flesh exhaling intoxication, and her little hand resting on his palsied arm.

The night hours were small when he gave up the struggle to efface the image of the siren from his throbbing brain, and he only awoke from a troubled sleep the next day to begin the battle.

At first he scoffed at the idea of going to her with the score as he had promised; but at last he told himself in a sort of desperation that he would go to her, and see her in the cold light of day, and rid himself of the folly that had settled itself on him.

And that resolution was an easy one to keep, as was also the fellow to it that he would take no trouble to make himself presentable, lest the doing so should lead his thoughts into channels that he would avoid; but when the last moment came it occurred to him that she might notice his disordered attire, and attribute it to the proper cause. Therefore he spent more time than usual on his toilet.

Also he would not be so cowardly as to put off the hour of his going to see her. He would go as early as possible, and come away at once.

Everyone knows that it is better always to face a temptation, and do battle with it manfully, rather than find safety in avoiding it.

A strong man like Loris Ipanoff could not but scorn himself if he avoided danger of any sort; now that he was ready to go to see the princess he could not repress a cynical laugh at the thought of his all night and day perturbation over her. Loris Ipanoff infatuated with a woman was indeed a thing to laugh at.

And, really, when one contemplates it in cold blood, what can be more absurd than the yielding of a strong man—strong intellectually, morally, and physically—to the fascinations of a woman? Fascinations! And, after all, what are they? A limpid eye, a satin skin, a supple figure, undulations, curves, rotundities, dimples; a voice with modulations and in-

lections perhaps, and maybe red lips that curve into bewildering smiles.

Oh, yes, it is absurd, and Loris Ipanoff suddenly finding himself able to analyze the matter calmly, smiled with a consciousness of strength. This was when he was on his way to Fedora. He had half a thought of turning back, and ending the affair there and then; but he very hastily decided that it would be cowardly, and so he went on, and truth to tell, his courage went on with him.

But when he stood, or rather paced the floor, in the reception room, waiting while his presence was made known to Fedora, he realized of a sudden that all his cynicism, his boldness, was a mockery of himself. He was not cynical, except that he could still scorn himself for the thing which existed—his infatuation; he was no longer bold. He trembled lest some woman's whim should make Fedora say she could not see him.

Then the word came that he should go to her where she was in her boudoir, and Marka had led him there, and left him at the curtained door, after drawing the portiere softly aside, and putting it in his hand. And there he had stood and trembled again, gazing at the half reclining figure draped in the clinging folds of a creamy, crinkled Japan erape.

Then, with a strong consciousness of his infatuation upon him, he had spoken, wondering if it was not a mistake, if she would not be annoyed that he had come to her unannounced, if she would not resent being seen in that— that seductive attitude.

And then he had spoken with a fearfulness he had never known, but could not help, and she had risen and greeted him with the frank welcome of a child. She was pleased that he had come, and he—was mad, beside himself, and no longer had any thought but of the beautiful woman who stood before him with outstretched hand.

He put the roll of music into her hand, and then dropped his eyes before hers. She laughed, as it seemed, with embarrassment, and said, naively:

"I meant the hand for you, not for the music; but thank you."

"Oh," said he, with a sort of gasp, "if it was for me, let me have it," and he seized it, and carried it to his lips, flashing a glance at her that made the color ebb and flow in her cheeks.

The next moment he was frightened at his temerity, and stammered:

"Forgive me! I could not help it."

She made him no answer, but turned quickly to a little upright piano, and there slowly spread out the music. He caught his breath, hesitated a moment, and then strode to her side.

"I have offended you," he said. She looked up timorously.

"You—you startled me. You say the maestro himself gave you this score?"

"Yes, he gave it to me. Will you not forgive me?"

She looked up with a half-frightened air, and her lip trembled. He cursed himself for his roughness. Suddenly she broke into a little quavering laugh, as if afraid too much had been made of the episode.

"But if I forgive you, you may do it again."

"I will try never to offend you again," he said, with an intense earnestness.

She bent over the music, and turned the leaves.

"Where is the disputed passage?" she asked in a low voice.

He silently ran over the score, and pointed it out to her. She hummed it, and without looking up, said:

"Then you were right."

"According to the score, yes."

"But there is nothing else to go by, so you were right."

"Your way was better, nevertheless. I wish you would sing it for me. Is that too presumptuous?"

She made no answer, but sat

down to the piano. "I hoped I might play your accompaniment," he said, timidly.

"If you like," and she arose from the seat.

He made a movement as if about to speak; but refrained, and sat down without a word. He played the prelude partly through, and then stopped, and said, abruptly:

"I think I do nothing but offend you. You would rather not sing."

"Oh, you are wrong," she said, eagerly. "I—I hoped we would sing it—that you would play the accompaniment—she stopped in confusion."

He looked up at her with burning eyes. Her eyes, wandering, drooped into his, and seemed powerless to turn away. For the second time he dove into those limpid depths, and the same mad-drenching, suffocating thrill shot through him. It lasted but a second, though it seemed an age, and then Fedora tore her eyes away, and faltered, nervously: "Please play."

A sigh that convulsed his broad chest issued brokenly from his lips, and he turned, and fingered the keyboard confusedly for a few seconds before he could collect his scattered senses to obey her.

He played and she sang, but before the song was half sung she stopped abruptly. "I am not in the mood for such a thing to-day," she said. "If you like I will sing something else."

"If you will," he answered, not looking up, but compensating himself by resting his eyes on the white hand that lay on the music-rack. The hand was not all. The lace trimmings of the glove had fallen half away, revealing the dimpled wrist and the swelling lines of the round arm, recalling the man's imagination the previous night when the whole glowing arm, from the softly rounded shoulder to the tapering wrist had exhaled its warmth against his cheek. He did not hear her question until she had repeated it: "What shall I sing? Nothing at all if you would prefer."

"Oh, forgive me. I was thinking of—"

"Somebody else," she added, and laughed gayly.

"Of something else, perhaps," he answered, looking up at her; "but you would have no right to be offended at that; for you were the something else. May I tell you what I was thinking of?"

She gazed down into his eyes, and laughed again, but there was a nervous ring in the laugh now, and he could see her bosom heave under the clinging stuff that no more than outlined it.

"No, Yes," she answered, "I want to know, but I am afraid it will be one of those tiresome complimentary things that men deal out to women because they think they crave them. I hate mere compliments."

"I don't know what you mean by a mere compliment. Something that is not sincere? I would not say anything to you that was not sincere. I—I respect you too much for to do that I suppose men have told you a thousand times that you were beautiful, have they not?"

"Yes," she answered, with shy softness, and then laughed with the gaiety of a child. "I suppose I might as well confess. Yes, I have been told so often that I was beautiful that I have come to believe it now. There! is that honorable?"

"How can you help knowing it?" he said, devouring her with his eyes; "but I do not merely say it; I have felt it, and thought of it, and—ah, I was thinking just now of how you looked to me last night when you stood beside me at the piano singing. I have never seen anything so beautiful. But—but—you are as beautiful now as then. I think you could never be anything else."

"There, there! that will do," she said, with a frank laugh that drove away an appearance of embarrassment; "you have said enough to confirm me in the best opinion I could possibly have of myself. Come, I shall sing to hide my blushes if you do not stop," and as she spoke the rich color mounted to her cheeks.

The fire of passion was in his eyes as they sank, burning into hers, and his hands trembled as he turned to the piano, and let them

fall upon the white keys. "What shall it be?" he asked.

"Anything. Let me see. Are you one of those Russians who has left his country because he scorns it?"

"No, I love my country," he answered slowly, and without any embarrassment.

"You are not a nihilist?" she said, drawing away with a faint show of alarm.

"Oh, no," and he laughed so frankly that it seemed as if he could not be telling an untruth; "but if I were would you hate me?"

"No," she answered, with a sudden seriousness. "I should not hate you, because I am sure those poor men think they are doing what is best for their country."

He looked up in surprise.

"Yours is a generous soul that can find excuse for even the nihilists; but you are right; they are mostly true patriots. We are of the class that can hardly appreciate the wrongs and sufferings of the peasants."

"Wrongs and sufferings," repeated Fedora dreamily. "Perhaps not; but their joys and sorrows, yes. Listen! Have you ever heard this?"

She did not wait for an answer, but broke into a love song of the Russian peasant, both words and music of which were attuned to the varying passions of the lover in his passage from dawning love to despair at his own unworthiness, from despair to wondering hope, from hope to certainty of love returned.

After the first bar he showed that he had heard it by softly playing the accompaniment. And it seemed to him as she sang and his fingers moved over the keys that he had never before comprehended an iota of the beauty and pathos and the true human feeling of the rustic ballad.

For a few seconds after she had ceased there was silence between them. Then he spoke.

"Yes, I have heard it before; but I never understood it—never felt it." He stopped for another moment, and went on hesitatingly: "It seems as if you must understand and feel it. How else could you sing it so?"

He tried to laugh, but the mirth was forced, and died away on his white face. "Have you had such an experience that you can sing of it so feelingly?"

He was thinking of himself and his right to hope, but his question recalled to her with sudden sharpness her dead—her murdered lover, and she recoiled with a pallid face from the man who was caressing her with his looks. She had been so intent upon her acting before that she had not thought of him as he was.

He caught her quick look of horror, hate it was, but he did not recognize it, and his heart smote him. What recollections had his question aroused to call to those beautiful eyes that strange look?

"Forgive me! It seems that I cannot help but blunder when I speak to you; and—and I could tear my tongue out for it."

She recovered herself, and smothered her hate for him.

"It was nothing," she said, and then came an inspiration. "But no, I will not say that. It was something. Would you like to hear what it was? I don't know why I should tell you; but singing that song—perhaps my thoughts before you came in. It will be no great confidence—many persons know it already; know some of it at least. Don't say no. Indulge me. I don't know why I should ask you to be bored, with the woes of my past—woes, after all, of no account now. But your question—Do you care to hear?"

"I should feel honored."

"Don't say that," she exclaimed, petulantly. "It is so like what other men say. If you were like other men I could never say these things to you."

She seemed to have forgotten him, and was talking as if thinking her thoughts aloud. His heart leaped.

"I spoke as I felt," he said, earnestly. "I would rather not speak at all than risk offending you. I ask nothing better than to listen to you."

"And you must forget what I say to you. There is nothing worth remembering. I am only talking for my own sake now. Sit

down there—no, there, where I can see your face as I talk. And I, I will sit here, as I used to do when I was a child—before—before I had any story to tell. I wonder if you are going to laugh at me with your man's superiority."

She turned upon him with an inquiring frown that was child-like in its ingenuousness. He shook his head slowly.

"No, I could not laugh at you."

He had seated himself in the chair pointed out by her, but she had not taken her place on the divan she had indicated as her seat.

As she had turned with her query she had thrown her arms up, and clasped her hands behind her head and in this unstudied attitude had stood while the frown faded away into a dreamy expression.

He devoured her with his regard. She seemed unconscious of his eyes, and presently let her arms fall slowly to her sides, and began a soft pacing of the rug before the open fire.

He watched her, and every nerve tingled and darted fire into his brain. All the conventions and restraints of womanhood seemed to have melted away from her, and she was as unstudied and natural as a child.

As a child? No. No child was ever so supple, so undulating, so sensuous, so seductive. No child could ever have paced that rug and turned so that the elastic folds of her erape gown would be drawn snug against her rounded figure till every undulating line was indicated. No child could ever have stirred the pulses of a man as that deliberately voluptuous creature did.

What a singular freak of mad anger that would induce a woman to barter her modesty for the gratification of her vengeance on the man who had, or whom she suspected of having, despoiled her of her lover—her lover to whom her womanly modesty would have been her greatest jewel.

That thought had not, indeed, occurred to her. To her it was all acting, and if, as was the truth, she found a pleasure in the acting, it was no more than any actress, successful in her art, would have done. At least she would have told herself that, there was nothing sensuous in her own feeling, no matter how close a semblance to it she feigned.

For Loris Ipanoff, though his blood ran like liquid fire in his veins at the sight of her, there was no thought of any passion save that alone of love. He loved her insanely. Her wiles drove him to the verge of destruction, but he would have loved her any how. She was merely luring him on faster than he otherwise would have gone.

She did not know that, could not know it, because there was no thought of love in her heart, but, perhaps, if she had known it, it would have made no difference; for she was impatient to bring the affair to an issue. She could not brook delay, and she would have led him on to a confession of love that very afternoon—she saw it trembling on his lip, quivering in his eye—if she had not feared to defeat herself by precipitation.

She was not playing the wanton for him to be conscious of it; but only that he might be affected by it. Thus it was that she covered the sensuous appeals of the woman with the frankness of the child.

And Loris Ipanoff, throbbing under the appeals of the woman, was conscious only of the ingenuousness of the child. His senses were already in a whirl, and when she suddenly ceased her walk and sank among the cushions of her divan with a dreamy abandon that gave no thought to the restrictions of conventionality, he breathed pantingly and held by the arms of his chair that he might not be overmastered, and throw himself at her side, and take her in his arms.

And there she lay amid the cushions of down, seemingly forgetful of him, every muscle relaxed, and the only sign of life the billowy swelling of her bosom. Slowly she returned to the present, as it seemed to him, watching her eagerly, and her eyes rested on him.

"Oh, I had forgotten," she said, softly. Then she laughed—a low ripple of sound—and putting her two hands behind her head, sank

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