

FEDORA

BY VICTORIEN SARDOU

(Continued)

less hands. Fedora looked up at him jealously. He straightened the arm, and placed it by the side of the body. It was like a recognition of death. Fedora shuddered and kissed the hand she held.

"Princess," said the general. She looked up again. His voice was husky, but there was otherwise something peculiar in it. He held her eye for a moment, and went on.

"He died of a wound."

She heard him numbly at first, and her eye dull with grief, remained unchanged; but presently it lighted with intelligence, and then, of a sudden, flashed with anger. Hatred of the unknown hand that had robbed her of her lover filled her soul, and she rose to her feet as if impelled.

"Who killed him?"

"That is what we do not know."

"But you will learn."

"Will you help us?"

"I? What can I do? If I can, yes. Tell me what it is."

She was at once fierce and incoherent, and she still fondled the dead hand.

"Can you compose yourself, control your grief for a few minutes while I ask you some questions?"

She struggled with herself to comprehend his meaning, and then, seeing that he wished to gain some information from her, made a powerful effort.

"Yes, I am composed. I will help you all I can. I am afraid I do not know much. See?" and she did as he had done—straightened the arm she held and put it by the body.

"Let us go into the other room," and he held her gently out.

The doctor was in the next room, and the general led Fedora into a third room, a sort of boudoir, fitted up luxuriously, according to the tastes of a bachelor to whom money was not a consideration. Fedora's own face stared at her from out of a frame standing on a table. She turned it face down. The general waited until she was seated, and then left the room, returning almost instantly with a man whose face she mechanically studied, even while she wondered what part he had to play in the tragedy.

"This is the man," said the general, "who found—Vladimir. He is a detective. He will have charge of the—"

He was going to say cease, but the word, in connection with Vladimir jarred, and he changed the form of the phrase—"He will take charge. Will you object to have him interrogate you? His mind will be freer than mine."

"Of course not. Time is valuable, is it not? Then let us lose none. Let him proceed."

"You hear, Gretch. The princess permits you to interrogate her."

Gretch bowed.

"Yes, I ask you to do so," said Fedora, quickly. "And if doing so will help you, forget that I am a princess forget that I am a woman. Ask as if I were a man who has no choice but answer. Think only of Vladimir—and his murderer. It seems to me that I know nothing that will help you, but I may be wrong. You will know better."

The general nodded his head in approval, and Gretch asked:

"You saw Mr. Vladimir today, yesterday—it is after midnight."

"He dined with me. He left me before nine o'clock."

"Did he say where he was going?"

"No."

"Did you not ask him?"

"No."

"Had you—had you any reason for not asking him?"

"No. None."

Gretch looked at the general. He had received permission to ask freely, but was diffident. The general understood him. He asked the next question.

"It seems to Gretch that it would have been only natural and justifiable curiosity on your part to have asked Vladimir where he

was going since he broke an engagement with you. Was there no pique, founded, perhaps, on jealousy, or something of that sort? It seems unusual that you should not ask where he was going."

"Not unusual when you remember," said Fedora, proudly, "that I loved him, and therefore had confidence in him. I would not insult him by asking where he was going. There was never any jealousy—never any pique, never any unpleasantness. I see! Perhaps you are thinking that he had a rival. Is that it?"

"Pardon me, but yes."

"Why not ask outright? No, he had no rival, and I believe was as certain of my love as I was of his."

"Can you think of no word he ever let fall to indicate that he had an enemy?"

"Not a word. I had already thought of that. Not a word."

"Did he seem to be heavy-hearted, or to have any foreboding? Did he show nothing in his manner?"

"I noticed nothing at the time, and can recall nothing now. He was as light hearted as ever I saw him, and his last words—I remember them distinctly—were: 'I will see you to-morrow, and give an account of myself.'"

Gretch considered a moment and, then bowing to the princess, he said:

"Thank you. There is nothing more, I think, and with that he would have left the room."

"Stop!" said Fedora, "you have learned nothing from me, then?"

Gretch looked at the general.

"Answer freely," said the general.

"Pardon me. I have learned that it is not among your friends that I must look for the murderer."

Fedora turned with a glance of disappointment toward the general. He understood it, and answered:

"It narrows the field of investigation. It is one possibility less. It strengthens his theory just so much."

"He has a theory, then?" cried Fedora, eagerly. "Let him tell it to me."

"It is late. You need rest. You are under a strain now that you cannot stand."

"You do not know me. When I am thinking of Vladimir's murderer I think less of my grief. Let me share your counsels. No one is more deeply interested. You see I am shedding no tears; I am not foolish. I may even help. You think I shall rest while the murderer of Vladimir lives? Never! Tell me whom you suspect, or, at least, what you have learned. Do you make me eat my heart out with vain hopes of vengeance. You will tell me."

There was a repressed passion in her that surprised the general and moved him to admiration.

"I will tell you," he said.

"Let Gretch tell me," she answered.

"Tell her, Gretch."

Gretch would have liked to shrug his shoulders. It was such a relief to him when he had to do a foolish thing; but the general was there, and Gretch told what he had seen without shrugging his shoulders, and afterwards he was glad of it.

CHAPTER III

Gretch was so little pleased with his task that he would have told his story in a very slipshod fashion had not the general prompted him now and again in a peremptory way.

Fedora listened silently, except for a catching of the breath once or twice and a choked sob, when Gretch told of seeing Vladimir lying face down in the cold white snow. When Gretch had finished there was a moment of silence, then Fedora said, huskily:

"It was a duel."

Gretch looked at the general.

"It was a murder," said the latter. "In a duel Vladimir would have been victor, for he was one of the best swordsmen in Russia. His foot must have slip-

ped, and he must have fallen forward. He was wounded in the back."

"Coward!" said Fedora. There was another brief silence and Gretch would have been glad to go.

"How should Vladimir have an enemy who would do that?" asked Fedora.

Gretch frowned and did shrug his shoulders this time. He did not answer even the glance of the general, and the latter answered for him:

"Gretch and I think it was the work of Nihilists."

"Fiends! But there was only one."

"Appointed," said Gretch, sentimentally, a trifle impatiently.

Fedora leaned her face on her clenched hand, and bent her fair brows, her blue eyes, black with the intensity of her feeling.

"Why do you think it the work of Nihilists?"

"The park belongs to one who is more than suspected of affiliation with them; the gate was opened with a key; no gentleman fighting on his own account would stab his antagonist in the back."

Gretch spoke, and the general nodded approval.

"But," said Fedora, her whole soul in the work of tracking the murderer of Vladimir, "the man must have been an acquaintance, at least of Vladimir's."

"Why?" asked Gretch, looking interested.

"Vladimir would not have gone with him to such a place if he had not been."

"Good," said Gretch.

"Then," went on Fedora, "the assassin must be found in a man who was enough a friend of the owner to be familiar with his park and enough a friend of Vladimir to induce him to go into the park."

"Good," said Gretch again.

The general looked at Fedora in surprise. It seemed incredible that this vindictive woman could be the same he had known. The passion of revenge seemed to have taken complete possession of her. The princess mused moodily a few moments, and then asked:

"Do you suspect any person?"

"No."

"You must have some way of going to work to find out who such a person might be."

Gretch smiled sardonically, and exchanged glances with the general.

"Oh, yes."

"And you will keep me informed? General, you will let this man come to me with his information—will you not? I can be trusted, and it is my right. Besides, I may help you. There is nothing I would not do to aid you—nothing, nothing."

There was a depth of passion in her tones and manner that impressed both the men.

"You shall be kept informed," said the general. "Gretch, you will always go to the princess after coming to me. I say it now, lest I might forget sometime."

Gretch bowed. He did not despise her as much as he had, and, then, she interested him.

"I shall not rest until the murderer is found," said Fedora, suddenly. "Yes, it must have been the Nihilists. Who else could have had the heart to kill one so noble, so good as Vladimir. But even they must have a reason. Why did they wish his death?"

"They were striking at me."

She looked from the general, who spoke, to Gretch, who stood impassive. Both evidently agreed as to that, and, indeed, she knew the motive to be sufficient. She said no more, and Gretch, having waited several moments, looked inquiringly at the general, who nodded. Gretch bowed and left.

After he had gone there was an unbroken silence of several minutes. Then the general roused himself.

"You will go home, now, princess?" he said.

"Yes. Let me look at Vladimir again," and she, who had been so hard with a vengeful passion but a moment before, broke into a

storm of sobs.

He led her into the bedroom again, and watched her pityingly as she fell on the bed and wept.

But presently she rose up and dried her tears, and turned to him, and caught him by the arm, saying passionately:

"We will find the coward that did it."

"Yes," he answered.

"I devote myself," she said. He did not need to speak; his hard-unrelenting face spoke for him.

Fedora went home, but it was not the same woman who had gone from home a few hours before. Likely enough there had always been an element of savagery in her nature unsuspected even by herself, certainly not appreciable by her acquaintances, nor even by that supreme judge of character, the maid.

From that night one devouring thought, one predominating impulse controlled her. Vengeance on the destroyer of Vladimir. From a mere desire it became a duty not the less imperative that it was self-imposed. She dwelt on it constantly. She shut herself out from society, accepting the excuse that was made for her that she was grieving for Vladimir, but making no excuses herself.

The days were passed in turning over in her mind all that bore on the personality of the murderer of her lover, and in waiting for the coming of Gretch.

He never failed to come, partly because he had been ordered to do so, but quite as much because he had learned to look for a new glimmering of light in Fedora's questions and comments.

It was slow blind work for many days, and to Fedora it seemed as if nothing was being done; but one day Gretch came to her, saying he had formed a definite suspicion at last, and he gave her his reasons. She listened intently, as she always did at such times and his reasons seemed good to her. She cried out joyfully:

"Surely this must be he. Loris Ipanoff, you say?"

"Yes, have you never met him?"

"Never, nor even heard of him. Have you taken steps to arrest him?"

"I do not know where he is."

"But you will discover?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then go, my good Gretch, and the day he lies in prison I will give you a thousand roubles. The day he dies I will give you five thousand. Ah! my poor Vladimir you will soon be avenged!"

But evidently this Loris Ipanoff was not so easy to find; for Gretch and several other agents detailed by the general, searched for him without success. His mother and sister and brother were living on the family estate some distance from St. Petersburg as quietly and unconcernedly as if no suspicion attached to the elder son and brother.

They were asked where Loris was, and answered, as a matter of course, that he was in St. Petersburg. The family did not know anything of the matter, but a guard was secretly set over the house in the hope that Loris would some day communicate there.

In the meantime Gretch and his fellows worked and worked in vain, as the daily visit to Fedora told her.

"But it seems to me you are working blindly," she said one day.

"There is no other way but to wait," answered Gretch, who, in these days of no results, dreaded to go to the princess.

"Wait? Wait? I cannot wait. Oh, if I were only a man!"

This was a reproach, and it nettled Gretch, who though he was afraid of the fiery princess, could not refrain from answering:

"But if madam the princess would tell me what she would do if she were a man I could do it for her."

Fedora saw the logic of the remark, but she only answered:

"Bah!" which was only contemptuous, but difficult to answer.

"If he is in Russia, it is impossible that he can remain hidden long," said Gretch, finding refuge in a familiar saying of his department.

"If he is in Russia! Is it not certain then that he is here?"

"No. He may have left the country."

Fedora rose up, and thumped the table with her clenched hand.

"He may have escaped."

"Yes."

"Yes."

It was extremely unpleasant for Gretch to say this, that had been in his mind for some time, but it had come at last. But there was no further outburst from the princess. She remained quiet for some minutes. Then she asked:

"Suppose he had left the country, where would he have been most likely to go?"

"Oh to Paris. They all go there."

The princess said no more to him, but ordered her carriage, and detained him until it was ready. Then she took him with her, and drove to the general.

She made no preface.

"Do you think it is likely Loris Ipanoff is in Russia?"

"No."

"Where then would he be?"

"In Paris."

"You think he is there?"

"I know it. I have just received word to that effect."

Gretch looked crestfallen, but Fedora cried:

"Forgive me for thinking you were not active enough. What will you do now?"

"I do not know. If I were certain that he was guilty—"

He paused, but the somber gleam in his eye told the rest. He would not wait for the slow hand of justice.

"How will you discover that?"

"Send Gretch, and let him do what he can."

Fedora looked at Gretch, and seemed to be weighing his qualifications. In fact, she was not thinking of him at all, but was turning over in her mind a plan of her own.

"Yes, send Gretch," she said, and I will go, too."

"You," said the general, anxiously.

"Yes, I," answered Fedora, with a flash of her blue eyes. "He is a man—I, a beautiful woman. I said I would stop at nothing. He shall tell me his secret if he has one. Heaven help him if he killed my Vladimir."

The next day she set out for Paris.

CHAPTER IV

The change that had come over the Princess Fedora since the death of her affianced husband, was a remarkable one, though a very natural one too, when her character and the circumstances of her life were considered.

From a careless, light-hearted, witty woman of the world she had become an intense, somber creature with but one purpose and with every act and every thought bent to its accomplishment.

Admitting the force of the shock she had received, the result seemed disproportionate to the cause unless one looked deeper than the surface for an explanation.

Fedora was a true Slav, who, in spite of any education she might have received, and it must be admitted at once to have been only superficial, in spite of any gloss of refinement, was yet, underneath all a savage in her nature and instincts.

All of her intellectual strength, and it was considerable and all of her emotional nature had up to this time been held in abeyance by the working of a recognized law—the same which makes the summer brook a placid, murmuring stream, but converts it by the loosening bonds of awakening life in the spring, into a roaring, foaming torrent; the same which makes the tiger's whelp a playful kitten until forced by the almost certain chance to unsheath its claws and show its fangs.

The time she had spent in St. Petersburg, waiting for some trace of the murderer of Vladimir and in questioning Gretch, had, unconsciously to herself, been formative, and, now, when she found herself in Paris she was not the impetuously angry and vengeful woman she had been when she had pledged herself to General Boroff to help him.

She was self-reliant and purposeful, and she threw herself into her task with an ardor that was not to execute the pain which her excited brain was keen to conceive. That there was anything unwomanly in her self-imposed

task never occurred to her, and she would have scouted the idea had it been suggested. She was merely pursuing a righteous vengeance with praiseworthy zeal.

Her settlement in Paris was an easy affair. She was accredited to the Russian Ambassador, already an acquaintance, and she had all the money she could wish to use, and with two such lovers she had no difficulty in removing any obstacles in her path.

Within a week of her arrival in the city she was established in luxurious quarters, for in Paris it is always possible to rent any sort of dwelling, from an apartment on the top floor to a ducal palace.

On her arrival she had sent for Gretch, who had accompanied her, and said to him:

"You will learn all you can of Loris Ipanoff, and report to me as soon as you have become acquainted with his habits."

Gretch accepted orders from the amateur more readily than besides official instructions to that effect he was in love with the maid of the amateur and found his account in being as intimate as might be in the household of the princess.

By the time the Princess Fedora was installed in her new mansion Gretch was ready with his report, and was charmed to be able to have a word with Marka while he waited the pleasure of the princess. Marka it may be said, was as delighted as Gretch; not because she had succumbed to his fascinations, whatever they might be, but because he was a novelty in her experience, and she regarded him as a wild beast tamer might a new kind of ferocious animal.

"Oh, you are here again?" said Marka.

Gretch nodded his head, and grinned.

"Oh, you rogue!" said Marka, shaking a finger at him, and doubling her chin in an adorable way.

"Come to the princess; she is waiting for you."

"I wish you were waiting," said Gretch, with an air that gave a meaning to his rather mysterious words.

"You men are all alike!" said Marka, coquettishly.

Gretch, chuckled ecstatically, and felt somehow as if he were "getting on" with Marka. He cracked his finger joints as he followed her to her mistress, a certain sign that he was pleased with himself. Well, Marka was an exceedingly well-favored bit of femininity—bright-eyed, plump, and vivacious, and, believing that he had made an impression, it was no wonder that Gretch was for cracking his finger joints.

"Well?" demanded Fedora, when she saw Gretch.

The detective smoothed the smirk from the face of the man and answered:

"I have found him."

"Of course. Had you any trouble?"

"Not the least."

"He is not hiding, then?"

"Not in the least."

"Tell me everything. Where does he live? What does he do with himself? Where does he go? What sort of people are his friends? Everything. You learned all this, of course?"

That it should be so much a matter of course that he had done all this, was annoying to Gretch; but it made him somewhat more humble in the telling of his story than he otherwise would have been. Had he been more of a philosopher he would have comprehended that lack of appreciation of difficulty was a trait which women and sovereigns have in common.

"He lives," said Gretch, "in elegant apartments on the Boulevard Haussmann, near the Rue d'Entrelles."

"He is not—married?"

She knew he was a widower, but she asked the question. Gretch was a little stupid. He simply answered:

"No."

She bit her lip, and looked annoyed. He saw that, but could not understand why. He started to go on with his story. She interrupted him with a toss of the head that meant, "Pshaw! why should I mind him?"

"Is he interested in any—woman? Does he—"

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"Oh," said Gretch. He was not altogether stupid.

"No there is no one. He goes often to see the Countess Olga Soukareff. You may have heard of her. She makes Paris her home."

Fedora nodded with a scornful curl of her lip. The Countess Olga was well known by reputation in St. Petersburg. The Czar had sent her away from there because she had made herself too fascinating to one of the Grand Dukes, and she now lived in Paris, and her salon was the resort of most of the Russian noblemen who visited Paris. The Countess Olga, in a word, was one of those women who are generally well beloved of the men, and well scorned of the women. Fedora knew her by reputation, and that is why she curled her lip at the mention of her name.

"What kind of a man is Ipanoff?" asked Fedora.

"Good-looking. Well, not handsome at all. I don't know. When you look at him he is all right enough, but not a man you would turn to see a second time. He is a very quiet, not fast, not moral. A man you would suspect of nothing. His face is impassive, and tells nothing. He spends his time at home reading, riding—is a good rider, and has a fine horse—at the opera, the theatre, and at the Countess Olga's. Sometimes they play high there, and it seems indifferent to him whether he wins or loses. He knows all the Russians, and speaks with nihilists and loyalists alike. Since I have been watching him he has acted like a man apart and sufficient for himself."

It did not strike the princess that there was anything remarkable in this report, and yet, as a fact, it showed a great amount of industry and intelligence on the part of Gretch. He was disappointed at not receiving a word of commendation from the princess, but he thought of Marka, and subdued any discontent he might have felt.

Fedora, having listened intently to all that had been said, leaned back in her chair, and with her chin in her hand, thought. Suddenly she asked:

"What will be the best way, for me to become acquainted with him?"

Gretch had thought of that. He shifted his feet uneasily, and pulled at the brim of his hat.

"There might be different ways."

"I only want the best way."

"I would hesitate to suggest—"

"Then you, too, think the best way will be through the Countess Olga?" said Fedora, sharply.

"Why, yes; but—"

"Well, it shall be that way. I would not stop at that for his sake. Then you will continue to watch him, and I will do my part. That will do."

Gretch left her with an alacrity induced by the thought of Marka, and Fedora was left alone to think. What she thought was another thing; what she realized was another. She thought vengeance and hatred. She realized that their pursuit involved unpleasant consequences.

(To be continued)

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