

FEDORA

BY VICTORIEN SARDOU

(Continued)

"It is a royal task you have given me," he answered, smiling, and casting on her that searching look which she remembered so well. She would not brook the look, however, and let her eyes droop before his.

"If you feel equal to it, I am glad," she said, "for I would like to be taken out of myself."

"May I sing to you?"

"Yes."

"Do you insist upon the fierce and stirring sort?"

"No, anything you like."

He went to the piano, and after a prelude that told her the nature of the melody, he commenced a long forgotten love ballad of the peasant folk, which she had not heard since she was a child.

It was a pathetic thing, and presently she found the tears filling her eyes, and she would have dashed them away angrily as not befitting the mood she should be in, when it occurred to her that it was quite in keeping with what she should appear to him, and with a feeling of shame she let them stand that he might turn and see them there.

And when he had ceased he did turn, and saw her in the act of wiping away the tears his song had caused to fill her eyes.

She had no thought at that moment of looking seductive to him, but never had she looked more so. He turned again hastily to the piano, and began to play lightly on it. Then, of a sudden, he turned, and if she had been looking she would have seen that his face was pallid.

"Something is wrong with you today, princess. I cannot know what it is, but you are so different from what you were yesterday, that I—I—"

He stopped.

She had thrown herself back in her chair, sobbing like a child. It was involuntary. It was not acting—she could not have acted at that moment. Why she cried she could not have told herself.

Had she been acting, however, she could have done nothing better to effect her purpose, for at the sight of her distress he sprang from his chair, and was by her side.

"What is it?" he cried. "Tell me. I cannot see you so. I shall go mad. My God, I know this is no time; but to see you in such distress! Fedora, tell me what troubles you. I love you, Fedora—love you with the madness that knows nothing of time. I have loved you forever. Can I do nothing? Fedora, Fedora, look at me!"

She had not drawn away from him, she had not recoiled as he had half-expected to see her; but her tears no longer flowed. The thought had come to her in the midst of them that the time for which she had striven had come, and the thought had dried the tears.

She lifted her face and looked at him—she forced herself to it.

"Fedora," he said in a half-whisper, "you look at me, and do not draw away, you hear me, and do not utter a word of rebuke. Am I mad? Did you hear me say that I loved you? I, who have known you one day, two days, I know not how long? Did you understand me, and do you let me hold your hands still?"

"I heard, I understand," she said, in a low voice. "You hold my hands. I know that."

"But, merciful God, is it, can it be true, that you love me?"

"But you say that you love me."

"I—I—that is different. I love you, yes; I worship you. Why, I must be mad! I may hold these hands? They are mine?"

She nodded her head, but there was still something which held him for a moment from pressing his advantage—something in the pallor of her face, the listlessness of her hands which he held in his firm grasp.

"You do understand me?" he urged, piteously. "Don't lead me on to hope only to hurl me back to despair. You let me love you? You—you love me? My God! if

that be true, then has heaven been realized for me! You are not afraid to trust so young a love? You do not ask for any test? I know my love, but how can you? How can you?"

Then she spoke, though it seemed to her that her tongue would not act.

"Why should you doubt, Loris? What can I say? I give myself up to you, and you ask me if it be true."

"But you give yourself so strangely. You are so unlike you were yesterday. I seem to see another woman. I must doubt my own senses when you say you love me. I told you that I love you as an act of madness; you permit it, and tell me you love me. It seems so unreal."

"And yet," she answered, with an effort to smile.

"I tell you it is real. For the proof my hands rest in yours."

He looked up at her for a moment, studying her face, which was so unlike the child-like face of yesterday. Then he loosed one hand, and stole his arm around her waist.

"This is more real," he said.

He bent over her, and pressed a kiss on her brow—he did not dare to kiss her lips.

"Now I know you are mine," he said.

"Yes, I am yours," she answered.

They sat in silence for some moments after this, but at last he asked:

"Something troubled you. Will you tell me now what it was?"

"Must I?"

"No, it is not must; but I wish you would."

"It was—unwomanly, perhaps; but I feared and hoped that you would do what you did—tell me you loved me."

He looked up expecting to see the frank look of yesterday on her face, but it was not there. He was puzzled, and did not know what to say. Suddenly,

"Do you remember your story of yesterday?"

There was a gleam in her eye now.

"Yes."

"Will you hear mine to-day? I owe it to you now. I could not tell it before. It is not a pleasant story to tell."

"If you are ready to tell it I will be glad to hear it," she answered, her heart beating with dull thuds.

"Let me begin by asking if you have not wondered why I live in Paris?"

"Yes, I have."

"I live here because it would be unsafe to live in Russia. Did you ever hear of Vladimir Boroff?"

"My God, yes," and in spite of herself she started from his arms, and turned upon him with a look of horror.

"I left Russia because I killed him."

"It was you, then?" she cried, with such a mingling of passion that he could recognize none of them.

"Yes, but wait."

"No, no," she exclaimed wildly, a horrible fear on her now that she would again have to endure his embrace. "Not any more tonight. I—I could not stand it. Don't you see that I am ill? My God! Go now! No, no, don't kiss me. Not tonight. Come again. For God's sake leave me! Let me go!" and without waiting for him to go she fled from the room.

She was no longer mistress of herself; but she ran like a mad woman to her chamber, and snatched up pen and paper, and wrote:

"It was Loris Ipanoff."

This she signed with her name and addressed to General Boroff. Not waiting even for an envelope she rang for Marka so violently that the girl came to her in a fright.

"Give this to Gretch, and tell him to send it without a moment's delay."

When the girl was gone she stood up, and wailed:

"Vladimir, you will be aveng-

ed!"

CHAPTER XIII

When Marka told her mistress that Gretch was waiting, she only told the truth. She was in the act of running to answer the violent summons of her mistress when she heard her name called from behind her in the voice of Gretch; hence she knew that Gretch was in the house. He had not been there up to that time, however, and she only knew from having heard his voice that he was there.

Gretch had arrived late. He had spent so much time over his toilet a novelty in his experience, that he had failed to appear at the time when it was usual for him to be there.

A little time, indeed, had been wasted at the entrance, for it took considerable proof to convince the porter that he was actually the Gretch of yesterday, and in consequence entitled to admission.

All that remained of Gretch in appearance was his little red eyes, and he had no idea of pointing them out in corroboration of his claim to be himself, for the reason that he was not aware that they were in any way peculiar. But there was in his voice—a deep bass, with a rolling, guttural growl running through it—and it was by that the porter recognized him at last.

But no sooner was he sure that the gayly appointed stranger was indeed Gretch than he burst into a great guffaw, for it occurred to his rude mind that there was in hand nothing less than a merry bit of masquerade. When Gretch brought him a clap alongside the head that stretched him out on the floor he understood that, whatever it might be; it was not a laughing matter, and he put on a very serious face, indeed.

But this was a mere episode, and did not trouble Gretch, overmuch, for the man was only a porter, and not to be expected to enter into the intricacies of a change of this sort.

None of the other servants recognized him, and Gretch did not make himself known to them, though it gratified him to observe that they all regarded him with extreme curiosity as he made his way through the rooms with an air of knowing perfectly well where he would find Marka at this time, and he went directly to that place. She did not see him coming, because at that moment she was hurrying to her mistress.

"Marka! Marka!" he had called out; but as we know she had not stopped.

But it was not long before he saw her returning. She was coming so quickly that he half wondered if it could be that she had seen him, and was anxious to have another look at him.

He disposed himself in as nearly as possible the manner of Monsieur Paul, when seated, and waited with a smile for her to recognize him. But that is what she did not do. It is only the eyes of love that penetrate all disguises.

She hastened up to him with the telegram her mistress had written in her hand, and was about to address him, then she looked at him, smiled graciously, murmured something to the effect of mistake hastening on again, when he exclaimed:

"And for whom are you looking, Marka?"

Then did she whirl about and stare at him like one who is under a spell. It was a veritable triumph for Gretch, and he smiled between his waxed mustache and his impetuous, just as he had done before the mirror. Marka gave a little jump at sight of the smile, but there was no light of recognition in her eyes.

"I beg your pardon," she said; "I thought you spoke."

"And so I did, Marka," cried Gretch, joyously. "Do you not know me?"

Marka stared and stared again, and the more she stared the more she smiled his ferocious smile.

"I should know that voice," said Marka, doubtfully, and cer-

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tainly she should, for it was unique. Gretch was ecstatic. She knew his voice when she could not recognize him in any other way. Might it not be that he had made more impression than he had believed? "You know my voice then, Marka? Then to whom does the voice belong?"

"Mon Dieu! Marka preferred the French for expressions of that sort. "Can it be Gretch?"

"Ah, ha!" said Gretch, delightedly, and he made a pretense of twisting his mustache as he had seen Monsieur Paul do.

"Do I dream?" cried Marka.

"Ho, no!" laughed Gretch, and he used both hands to twist his mustache. That is he appeared to twist it. He had not the courage to really touch it with his fingers.

"Speak to him," said Marka, gaping at him.

Then he rose from his seat, and pulled his coat down as he had seen Monsieur Paul do, thrust one foot out in the manner of the same model, and bowed at nearly as might be after the style of the paragon. Of course he fell short of the original, as any mere foreigner must have done; but the imitation was good enough for Marka to recognize.

Then she gaped a moment longer, put the knuckles of her hands against his hips, bent forward a little bit, opened her red lips till every shining tooth was displayed and laughter till the tears rolled over her round cheeks.

This was not what he expected, and he was doubtful. He shifted from one foot to the other, puffed out his cheeks, and snatched at his waxed ends. This was an imitation of nobody but it was so like what she had seen Monsieur Paul do upon an occasion when he was vexed, that Marka doubled herself up in paroxysms of mirth. She thought she had done an injustice to Gretch, that he was a merrier fellow than she had imagined, and that he was taking this execrating method of showing her what an absurd little chap Monsieur Paul in truth was.

"Mon Dieu! mon Dieu! you will kill me, Gretch. I will forgive you everything for this. I never realized what a little monkey Monsieur Paul was till now. You are so absurd, so ridiculous! I never would have believed that he could be so funny. Oh, mon Dieu!" and she went off into another peal of laughter.

A thing may be pretty, betwixting, or otherwise, according to your point of view. Anybody else than Gretch must have thought Marka, as she stood there, convulsed with mirth, a very attractive picture. Gretch had a point of view peculiar to himself, and Marka had never looked less attractive to him than then.

He blew his lips till they actually seemed to flutter, and pulled the waxed ends in real earnest turning one up, and the other down, and making Marka scream again.

"Funny, ridiculous!" cried Gretch, away down in his throat.

"Stop, I tell you, Gretch! I can stand no more. Who would have believed you could play the fool so well!"

"Br-r-r!" roared Gretch, with a frightful Russian oath.

But Marka would not take him in earnest no matter what he did.

She could do nothing but laugh, and had he but known it, he had made greater strides into her affections during those minutes that she believed him to be mimicking the major-domo, than during the whole of his intercourse with her. Alas! for him, he did not know it. Suddenly Marka bethought her of the telegram.

"Good gracious, Gretch! Take those absurd things off. No, don't wait for that. If you will play the fool, you must take the consequences. Here is a telegram. I don't know what's in it," which was true, for she had forgotten to read it, "but it must go at once. You made me forget it with your foolery. Now, don't stop, but hurry away. Any other time I would take you to the princess, and let her have a good laugh; but she is in no mood for it now. Go, go, go!" and she took him by the shoulder, and thrust him out of the room, placing the telegram in his hand as she did so.

His putting the telegram into his pocket was a purely mechanical action, for he was not really aware of what he was doing, excepting that he was rushing out of the presence of the woman who had heaped accumulated anguish on his soul.

He was ridiculous to her; he had made her laugh; she had wished to take him to her mistress to make her laugh.

Ridicule is a shaft that sometimes makes a mortal hurt. Gretch had not comprehended the attitude of Marka—her mental attitude, that is. Her physical attitude was all he could think of. She had held her sides with laughing at him. He had gone to her to fascinate her, and she had laughed. Telegram and everything else was forgotten, swallowed up in that one thought. Laughed at, scorned.

He rushed out of the house, swearing a variety of Russian oaths in the mere wantonness of despair; growling then into the air, and then smiting them with his clenched fists. He saw nobody, nothing, and that is why he ran his nose, as the saying is, into the face of a man coming around the corner.

A Russian oath of unusual intensity was his only apology, and he was on his way when he saw on to he did not know. His brain was in a whirl, and he simply went on and on.

Under such circumstances as were acting upon him, men do singular things. Some men would have rushed to the nearest river side, and plunged in with suicidal intent. A thorough-going Frenchman, such as Gretch looked to be, would have gone to the top of some monumental column, and made an unpleasant mess of himself on the pavement below.

Gretch, without reason, without volition, guided, no doubt, by his Russian instinct, went on and on, until he came to a cafe. There he turned aside, and sought a secluded spot, and ordered brandy, brandy, brandy.

Water might do for some, but brandy alone could drown his sorrow, and drowned it must be. If he had really been a Frenchman the brandy would have detected his perturbation by the wildness of his manners, but being a Russian, Gretch gave no outward sign, of his inward condition that was comprehensible to a Frenchman.

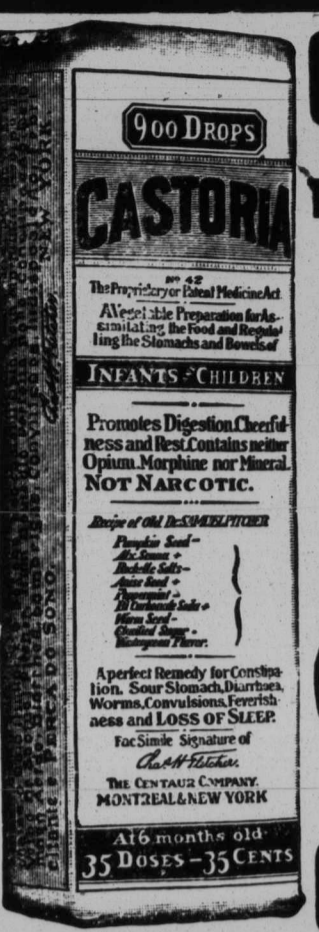
He asked for brandy and brandy, but his manner was stony, and they gave it to him. If he drank such quantities as no Frenchman ever did they could but stare. Refuse him they could not, for the more he drank the more dignified he became, and how should they suspect that his dignity was but the monument which rose over his drowned sorrow?

Fedora lay numb in her chamber with a tragic shock, her thoughts following the message she had sent over the wires to St. Petersburg.

Gretch sat numb with brandy, the message, tumbled out of his pocket by a groping hand, lying on the floor of the cafe, unheeded by him and by the garçon who had him in charge.

CHAPTER XIV

When Gretch rushed away from Marka he ran into a man, and swore a Russian oath. If he had sworn in French, if he had sworn at all, if he had sworn in



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any language but Russian—but he did swear in Russian.

The man he ran into was Nicholas Lasinsky.

Nicholas Lasinsky was a man who would have gone out of his way at any time to injure Loris Ipanoff. At the particular moment that Gretch swore the Russian oath, Lasinsky was literally aching to find some way of injuring Loris Ipanoff.

Nevertheless, at the apparition of a Frenchman swearing Russian, he turned and made a careful study of him. Then he looked up at the front of the palace—it was a palace—and a sarcastic smile curled his lip.

"A transformed Russian," he muttered, and thought no more of the incident.

There was no reason why he should give the matter any thought, but he might have dwelt on it a little longer had he not seen something which drove every other thought out of his head. Loris Ipanoff, hardly less disturbed in appearance than Gretch, hurried out of the palace, brushing by Lasinsky in his preoccupation, without noticing him.

Him Lasinsky followed with an evil look until he was out of sight.

"He was here yesterday, and he was here today," muttered Lasinsky. He had been very angry, knowing Loris had been with Fedora the day before. Now he was furious. Lasinsky had marked Fedora for his own. She was all that any man could desire, and was particularly what he desired. She was rich. And Ipanoff, who posed for a cynic, had, with his customary ease, found the open sesame to the presence of the princess at once and as often as he cared to go.

Lasinsky was conscienceless and acute, but that was his only equipment for rascality. He had the will, however, and the determination, and he set about trying with renewed energy to discover some means of injuring Ipanoff and of preventing him from carrying off the prize.

He was a small villain, and his resources were not great. He could think of nothing heroic to do, but it did occur to him that a woman's mind is proverbially keener in such matters than a man's and that decided him to make common cause with the Countess Olga, whom he knew to be infatuated with Ipanoff.

If she could be convinced that Fedora was on the point of taking Ipanoff from her, what would be more natural than for her to use her keen wit to create a division between the two.

It will be remembered that Lasinsky had been cognizant of the impression made by Fedora on the night of her debut at the Countess Olga's salon.

He was too cunning to go to the countess, and bluntly state his errand, for it was quite certain

that she would make a pretense then of indifference. He had no excuse for calling on her, but he knew where to find her, and he sought her, trusting to his address to arouse her curiosity and secure her help afterward.

He knew she drove her ponies on the Bois every afternoon, and held a sort of open air reception. He betook himself therefore to the Bois, and loitered along in the hope of catching the countess at an opportune moment for his coup.

The opportunity came to him as it is said always to do to him who waits. The countess was drawn up at one side, chatting gayly, as her fashion was, to a number of gentlemen. He sauntered up, and entered into the conversation, a thing always easy for him to do, and presently was at the elbow of the countess. He knew how to do a thing of that sort so well, having, by long practice, learned how to push himself through a circle of courteous people.

She smiled at him not because she liked him, but because she enjoyed his sarcastic temper, and she knew she could depend upon him to display it. He followed the drift of the conversation for a while, and then gradually turned it into the channel that suited him.

"I have seen no six-in-hand this afternoon," he said in answer to some question by one of the gentlemen.

The remark led at once to a discussion of Fedora in which the gentlemen in deference to the woman present did not show too much enthusiasm until they discovered that the countess equaled any of them in her admiration for the beautiful princess.

"The most beautiful woman I ever saw," said the countess, "and as good and witty as she is beautiful. A wonderful combination! Ah, what a prize for some one!"

"But she is a widow," said Lasinsky, "and it will require great art to capture her."

"Well," retorted Olga, "it is your opportunity then, for you are as artful as any one I know."

It was rather a sharp thrust, and Lasinsky winced under the subdued laughter of the men. Lasinsky's income from fixed sources was not a large one, and he was obliged to eke it out in ways that men with larger incomes were inclined to look askance at. Laughing, which is subdued, usually has a meaning hidden under it. Olga could be merciless with some men. Lasinsky was one of them, and she was no better disposed toward him than she had noticed that he resented her liking for Ipanoff.

"Ah, well," answered he, with an assumption of frankness "I do not deny that I would make a vigorous effort if it were worth while, but I fancy one more artful than I has already made an impression."

(To be continued)