

FEDORA

BY VICTORIEN SARDOU

(Continued)

The shudder was real enough, just as most of the story was true. It was only her way of telling it that gave it a new meaning.

"I almost laughed in his old face when he leered at me, and when I went back to play—to play, do you hear?—I mimicked him, and my old friends and I had mirth at his expense. That night my father told me proudly that I was to marry the Prince Romanoff."

"I cried like the child I was at the thought of such a husband; but even then I did not realize what it would be to go to him as his wife. What do you think my parents told me to console me? That he was immensely rich, that his rank was so exalted, and then that he was so old. That he was so old that he could not live long."

"Are you not glad that you are a man? Are you not glad that you have never been bought and sold? Bought and sold! He came again after my parents had told me I was to marry him."

"I can see him now as he appeared to me that day. Every art of the stage had been exhausted to make him seem the antithesis of what he was. Instead of a worn out seventy he was made up for an exuberant seventeen. But I could not laugh then."

"He took my hand in his, which trembled so that he could barely grasp mine at all, and he gazed over me—gazed over me! And then I hated myself for being beautiful."

She sprang to her feet, and began again to pace the rug.

"You asked me if I had had an experience like that of the song?" She stopped before him with her hands outstretched before him in a piteously appealing attitude. "Now you know."

Never had he been so stirred as at that moment. The story was not such a novel one. He had heard similar ones before; but never one that appealed to him as this did. He would have given all his future, all hope of happiness, if he might have had the right to take her in his strong arms and comfort her, if he could have had the right to show her how much of happiness there could still be in the world for her.

But what time was that to talk to her of love! And what was the use of words to her. But he could not resist the impulse to do something.

He rose up, and took the two little appealing hands into his, and held them as if he had the right. If he noticed her shudder, it was to ascribe it to some other than the right cause.

"Oh, how cruelly you have been used!" he said.

"Yes, I suppose so. I think I do not exaggerate in thinking so," she said, absently, at the same time withdrawing her hands from him with a slow, lingering movement, as if doing it reluctantly, but with unconscious reluctance.

"I should think you would hate all men," he said.

"Oh, no," she said, with a bright smile. "Why should I? I am happy now—strangely happy for some reason," and she looked at him with a smile of ingenious wonder that set his heart beating tumultuously.

It seemed to him as if this peerless creature, who was yet but a child, must find her new happiness in him. There was nobody else, or she would have spoken of it at such a time. But she relieved his mind as to that as if she had read his thoughts.

"And now you know why I can understand the song. It is from having been robbed of the similar experience."

"And—and—not from—from having had a subsequent and happier experience?" he queried fearfully.

She laughed gayly.

"Ah, no; not yet. But I will not say that I am not ready. Only," and she grew suddenly serious, "it has not been yet, not yet."

A thrill of joy shot through him, for there was something in

the way Fedora made her denial of love that gave him hope. Had he not been so afraid of shocking her he would have declared his passion at that moment.

"You will not regret having told me what you have?" said he.

"Oh, no; but I know I have not been wise; for I have given you my story, hardly my secret, alas! and you have not given me yours, if you have one. Have you?" she demanded, archly, though her heart beat loudly.

A singular expression crossed his face at her question.

"My story," he repeated.

"Ah," she cried in the same gay tone, "you have one, I am sure."

"Yes," he answered, somberly, "I have one; but it is not fit for your ears."

"Oh," she answered, in a tone that was almost tender in its softness, "I am afraid I have hurt you. It was thoughtless; but I did not imagine that you, so strong, so—" she stopped in confusion, as if afraid of saying too much, or as if his eager gaze disconcerted her.

"No, you have not hurt me," he said, quickly. "But it would not have mattered if you had. I would rather be hurt by you than caressed by another."

"Oh," she cried, deprecatingly, and he was afraid he had said too much.

"I would tell you my story, but you might shrink from me. Some day I must, I know I must. Will you let me?"

"Tell it to me now," she said in a tone, the eagerness of which she could not repress.

"No, not now," he answered, "not until—" he checked himself, and she knew as if he had said it that he meant until the time she had promised to marry him.

It was to be only as his promised wife that she was to learn from his own lips that he was the murderer of her Vladimir; for what other secret could he have that he might not tell her.

But he was irrevocably hers now, and she need have no fears of the final result. He himself would tell her of his guilt, and she would punish him as the man who had robbed her lover of life should be punished.

Men are called the stronger sex, and see how they yield to the weakness of a woman. She had but acted a little and he had fallen at her feet worshipping.

But it had fatigued her, and since the game was played for the time, she wished he would leave her. She could not send him away; but she could let him see how fatigued she was, and he was in too tender a mood not to hasten away, despite her protest.

"I am sure I have bored you," she said.

"It is you who are tired," he answered, reproachfully. "See you are pale. How can I forgive myself?"

"Do not speak so. Promise me that you will come again. Since I have told you what I have it seems to me that you are a nearer friend. Will you be my friend? And will you come again?"

"I am more likely to abuse the privilege than neglect it."

"Oh, you could not. I have so few friends—none, unless you really will be one—and I fear I shall be lonely."

"When may I come again?"

"When you like. I mean it. Come to-morrow. But perhaps that would not be proper, not conventional. Ah, why, are there such rules?"

"It might not be conventional; it would be quite proper. I will come if I may."

"I shall expect you. We will sing together. I know more of the peasant ballads, and I will sing them to you. And you must know something I do not, and that you must sing to me. I am sure you sing."

"Sometimes. You will forgive me for having tired you. Au revoir."

He hurried away as if he were afraid to remain under her coaxing eye and plaintive voice. He should have returned for but a

moment to see what expression took the place of coaxing in her eye when he had left the room.

CHAPTER XI

The passions of love and hate were seething at white heat in the luxurious boudoir of the mistress; but in the little antechamber beyond, out of sight and of hearing, there was being enacted a merry comedy in which the maid was taking her part with almost as much aplomb as her mistress.

Gretch was the victim in this case. Marka had had permission to send the poor fellow to the right about; but as a mouse is played with by a cat so was he by Marka, who though she had not the cat's excuse of eventually wanting, was nevertheless loth to let him go without a deeper scratch than she supposed him to have.

And he, with his heart already scored and seared by these wiles of hers, lung on, hoping and hoping that each day would find her more in earnest than the last had done. At first he had returned each day, thinking his case all but won; but repeated failure had made him more doubtful, until at last he had come to wondering if she ever would care for him.

It was very funny to her, but it was the most dismal affair to him that he had ever engaged in. He had not read many books, and so knew nothing theoretically about the divine passion, and not having been in love before, he had had no practical experience.

It is true that in the course of his detective work he had had a number of cases of suicide, murder, and the like, all of which were said to owe their origin to love; but if the cause ascribed had been given him in some unpronounceable and incomprehensible word he would have comprehended just as well.

There are two classes of persons who can laugh at love: the one that has never loved and the one that has outlived a love. Of course either may become a victim at any time; but until that time they can honestly scoff at love. Nevertheless, love does exist, and it does make its victims do for it what they would do because of no other passion.

Marka was not in love, had never been in love, and could not see anything but the humorous side of it; for unfortunately it has a humorous side. So has seasickness; but seasickness sometimes kills.

Marka had seen men in love before. It was her fortune to have inspired the passion a number of times; for you see, she was a trim, plump, bright-eyed creature upon whom it was pleasant for the eye to linger, and dangerous.

She could not take Gretch seriously, and she was party to be excused, for Gretch at any time was not a thing of beauty, and Gretch in love was even less so, for the reason that the failure to receive some sort of encouragement had given him a lugubrious expression that was far more comical than pathetic to look upon.

Permanent encouragement, that is to say, "He received an elusive lot of temporary encouragement in the manner of the mouse in the claws of the cat."

It is said that no man is wise in his love, and it is likely enough to be a fact. Certainly Gretch was not wise in his, for the more he was made to feel that his suit was hopeless the more ardently he wooed, as if he hoped to make her pity first, and come to love by that road.

If he had been a handsome young fellow she might indeed have done that, but being as he was no longer in the heyday of his youth, and conspicuous mainly by reason of an orange colored beard, a yellowish complexion, and small red eyes, it was not reasonable to expect any pity from her.

Instead of pity he received at least a new pang. It was that of jealousy.

Monsieur Paul was the cause of it. Monsieur Paul was all that Gretch was not, and, no doubt, the contrast told in his favor. Not

that Marka was in love with him either. She was in love with no man, but Monsieur Paul in the pride of his importance, high salary, savoir faire, and the like, had at the first overlooked the pretty maid.

It was for no man to overlook her with impunity, and merely to punish him she had permitted herself to attract his attention. His attention being attracted there was nothing for it but to show his gallantry. He showed it, and she had not found herself able to laugh at him.

She knew, indeed, that it was gallantry, and not love, which the dapper little major-domo displayed toward her. But Gretch did not know that. He only knew that the little fellow, whom he could have twisted into a corkscrew, was treated with a consideration to which he was a stranger.

At first he was furious, and had the bad taste to upbraid Marka with her conduct. Perhaps even his judgment was worse than his taste, for Marka had lifted her eyebrows—an imitation of her mistress—and said:

"And since when have you had the right to criticize my conduct?"

Poor Gretch! he had just sense enough left to know that he had been guilty of a blunder. He stammered:

"But I love you!"

He had got as far as that before many times, however, and it only made Marka laugh very merrily. It had reached just this point at the time that the intense game was being played in the boudoir.

"You have said that so many times," said Marka when she could stop laughing.

"And you will never give me any satisfaction," said he.

Now that was very stupid of him, for whatever a man does he should never complain of a woman to herself until he is sure that she loves him, and cannot help it.

"I did not ask you to say any such thing," retorted Marka, spiritedly, but not with any especial relevance.

"What you can see in that little Frenchman?" said Gretch, with a little regard for relevance as herself.

Marka's eyes gleamed with mischief; but she assumed a serious and as pearly as possible a judicial air.

"Oh, as to that," she said, "he is a gentleman—almost. Look at the clothes he wears. And where will you find a more beautiful mustache or imperial? And when he walks one could almost fancy he was going to dance at the next step. Come now, Gretch, don't be so disagreeable. Don't you admire him yourself?"

"Pouf!" said Gretch.

"You are jealous of his good looks," said Marka. "And you see only his clothes, which any man could have. I could tie him into knots with one of my hands."

"Don't be silly. He would split you with his rapier while you were tying your stupid knots. I'll wager he can fence with the best. He has the air of it."

"If I catch him making love to you I will give him a chance to try it," said Gretch, savagely.

Marka would have rather enjoyed the sight of the two fighting for her sake, but she was loyal to her mistress, whatever else she was not, and she knew she would not approve of that.

"And who gave you the right to say who shall make love to me and who not?" she demanded.

"If I cannot nobody shall," he growled.

"That is like a foolish boy," said she. "Who said that you should not? Have you been doing anything else all the time we have been in Paris, I should like to know? Oh, you annoy me."

"But you give me no satisfaction."

"Why should I?"

"You know I love you."

"There it is again! That everlasting love, love, love! One would fancy it was the only thing in the world. For my part, I am tired of it."

And that was all Gretch made of his appeal, his threats, and his protestations. But this time something unusual had occurred to him—he had had an idea. He said no more at that time, but hastened away to ponder his idea. He should have waited until Loris left the princess, for that

was part of the great game his superiors were playing.

However, he left without thinking of anything but the very elusive Marka and his idea, and it so happened that he was not wanted that day.

As for his idea, it would not be worth the discovering were it not, as often happens in this life, that it intruded itself indirectly into the game of his superiors, who, in making up their scheme, had failed to take into account his human frailties. Gretch, indeed, had never before given any striking evidence of having any that could interfere with the discharge of his duty.

The idea, to make as few words as possible, was nothing less than to bring into his service those arts which were so successful with Monsieur Paul. He argued in this way:

"What answers so well in the case of a little fellow like that Paul must answer still better in a bigger fellow like I am. I will show Marka what a Russian can do when he tries."

So he set about showing Marka. He had a little money laid away against a rainy day, and that he drew upon, and went to a tailor's. Said he:

"I want you to fit me with a suit of clothes in the best mode. I want that no one shall be able to say, 'Such a one is better dressed.' Do you comprehend?"

If it had been an English, or still more an American tailor, he would have grinned, and said:

"Oh, yes, I understand. A girl eh?"

But this was a Frenchman, and he took the order as if it had come from a prince of the blood and was able to charge a little extra, knowing that a man so obviously in love as Gretch would not stand upon a trifle when the fascination of the lady of his heart was in question.

How did he know Gretch was in love? You would have known yourself. If one is in love he is in love, and there is no more to be said.

Well, there was haste to be made, for Gretch was of a mind to take Marka when she was in a temper to be pleased with a man's external appearance. Could the man of shears have the clothes by the morrow? It would be difficult, but if monsieur would not object to paying a little more for the haste, Monsieur could very well see that, etc., etc.

Gretch saw, of course. He would have paid twice as much, which it was a great pity the accommodating tailor did not know. However, he did not know, and the next day he delivered the clothes, charging only half as much again as the right price was.

The clothes fitted. There was no doubt of it, and in the privacy of his own room Gretch donned them again, and admired himself.

It was already clearer to him why Marka should lay so much store by the clothes a man wore. But he was not ready to wear them under the public eye yet.

Having feasted his eyes on his perfections, as revealed by the new garments, he doffed them, and crept into his now despised clothing of barbaric Russian cut. He felt it little wonder that Marka, herself so trim and tastefully clad, should have despised him, and the clearer it became to him that she had been right the surer he was that he could not now fall of a triumph.

But the clothes were not all. He went into a hairdresser's and opened his business with a bluntness that did credit to his training as a detective, one of the paramount rules of the service being never to waste time unnecessarily.

"If you take but one look at me, you will see that I am a Russian," said he to the bowing artist.

"A great people, the Russians!" said the artist diplomatically.

"Yes, of course," assented Gretch, carelessly, "but they do not know how to dress nor how to wear their hair or beards."

"Oh, the custom of the country goes for much," said the artist.

"Well, this is not Russia," said Gretch.

"That is true," admitted the artist, emphatically.

He was on safe ground there.

"Well, I want my hair and beard as they should be in Paris."

"Certainly. You will have but a few minutes, and you shall see."

"I suppose a mustache and imperial will be the thing?" said Gretch, inquiringly, as he seated himself.

"It would be military," said the artist, surveying Gretch's face doubtfully.

"That is right. I wish the military style."

"It is not often that the beard of this color is so worn. A very rich color, of course; but it is not usual."

"What color should it be? What does it matter about the color?" demanded Gretch, without the least heat, and only desirous of information.

"Well, black looks the best with imperial; but with mustache alone—"

"Have you any way of making the beard black?"

He knew very well there was a way, but it was a rule not to seem too knowing.

"Certainly. I can produce such a black that your own wife would not know it was dyed."

"I had not thought of that," muttered Gretch; "I don't want to be disguised."

"It will be no disguise," said the artist, eager to smooth away all difficulties; for your tonsorial artist with his dye is like your surgeon with his knife—he likes to use it. "The dye will improve—if the looks of monsieur could be improved."

It was a compliment that could be taken or rejected. Gretch took it, and decided on the dye. His only objection had been that it was unpleasant to be loved as some one not yourself.

Ah, what changes can be made with the razor, the shears, the dye, and the pomatum in the hands of an artist. Gretch came out of the artist a transformed being. That he did not recognize himself at first did not matter at all; for after one glance at the martial face reflected at him out of the mirror, he was certain that only now had he ever seen the true Gretch.

He hastened home with roscate visions of conquests to come floating in his brain. But the full effect was not gained until he had donned his new clothing. Then indeed, did he despise the Gretch of yesterday as much as ever Marka could have done.

Where would that whippersnapper Paul be now? It was quite true that he had not yet attained the step which momentarily threatened to glide off into a dance but that could come later.

Gretch smiled at himself in the mirror between his imperial and waxed mustache, and the result of that effort was satisfying, too. If a woman wanted something fierce, there she was.

He set off to see Marka.

CHAPTER XII

Fedora was again waiting for Loris Ipanoff.

Since the previous afternoon when he had left her and the present moment she had come to the determination that this afternoon she would know his secret. He might declare his love if he chose, and she would accept it—anything rather than prolong an ordeal which was trying her a great deal more than she had had any idea it could.


She could have stood it better but for a strange, unnatural feeling of pity, sorrow, she could hardly tell what it was, that possessed her whenever she thought of the man. And think of him she did more than she wished. The tones of his deep voice, the glance of his earnest eyes, haunted her, and made her angry with herself.

What had she to do with them? Why should she pity the man who had not pitied the man she loved?

And it was in this mood, so different from that of yesterday, that she waited for him, listened for his step, wondered if he would look down into her eyes as he had yesterday, and hated herself for so waiting, so listening, so wondering.

And how she hated him! It was true that he might not be the guilty man. She had thought that oftener since yesterday than at any time before, and she had wondered why. And why did she thought give her that pang of pleasure?

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There was not the fierce joy in waiting that there had been the day before, and it seemed to her that she could not wait until she had led him on to declare his love and tell her the secret he had spoken of.

Suppose, after all, he should not be guilty? But the supposition gave her a suffocating feeling, and it was as if her mind could not grasp it. She told herself angrily that there could be no doubt of it; that it only required the proof of his own word to make it certain.

She rang for Marka.

"Is Gretch waiting?"

"No, madam."

"He is late. Why is he not here?"

"I think he is sure to come. He always does."

"When he comes tell him to be ready to make a dispatch to the telegraph office."

"Yes, madam."

Giving that order was something like burning her bridges behind her. Then she took to pacing the rug, and it was while so engaged that Loris Ipanoff came. His face was pale, and he looked at her as if she held his fate in her hands. She knew by that look that he could not let another day go by without saying what was in his heart; but she was not as much at ease as she had been.

"The panther is treading her jungle again, you see," she said to him, with a smile.

"I wonder if she is disposed to be merciful to intruders," he said, inquiringly.

"Always, if they come without guile in their hearts," she answered, half-fiercely.

"I cannot imagine a living creature who would wish to harm you," he said.

"We never know," she said, absently, "how or when we are to be harmed. Have you come prepared to sing me something? If you would please me, let me be something fierce and stirring."

He looked at her uneasily. Her mood disturbed him. She saw it, and upbraided herself for so ill-acting her part. She made an effort, and smiled in the old child-like way that was so captivating to him.

"Now you can see how disagreeable I can be," she said, sweetly.

"Oh, not that; but I did fear I had again offended you."

"It is not so easy for you to offend me as you seem to think," she answered, and then looked embarrassed.

"Has anything happened wrong that I can do anything to right?" he asked, eagerly.

"Perhaps—no—no. Sit as you did yesterday, and I will sit here," she took a chair instead of the divan, and rested her chin in her hand. "Will you not do something to entertain me? I know that is a hard thing to ask of you; but it is what I wish. I cannot entertain you."

And she could not. She had not the power to act that had been hers yesterday. She hungered to know if this man had really taken her lover's life; but she could not now lead him on to tell her.

He looked less dismayed than he might have done. If she wished him to entertain her he could not be indifferent to her, he thought.

(To be continued)

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