

FEDORA

BY VICTORIEN SARDOU

(Continued)

She seated the princess by her side, and then as the men crowded round, she did not see Ipanoff, she boldly sent for him.

"Lasinsky, fine me Ipanoff. He ran away the moment the princess came. Where is he?"

Fedora had steeled herself for any surprise, any unexpected word or encounter, but this sudden question, this innocent but singularly apt accusation made her start.

Lasinsky looked up with a slight frown, for he did not relish yielding his place by the side of the princess in order to find the man he disliked.

"He is not far away," he said. "Call him, and he will come. Pardon me," and he raised his voice a little. "Ipanoff, the Countess Olga yearns for you."

"I will not forget this man; he lates Ipanoff."

"She shall not yearn in vain," was the almost immediate answer in Ipanoff's deep tones, and in spite of her effort at self-control Fedora felt a chill creep over her.

But that she mastered, and presently looked up as the circle parted to let Ipanoff enter.

She saw the man who, she believed, had murdered her lover, and a flood of hate swept over her. And yet she smiled as he was presented to her, and looked up into his face with frank cordiality.

The Countess Olga watched them both with an interest that was almost anxious, then smiled gaily as she said to Fedora:

"This Ipanoff is a scoundrel of our sex. It is my dearest hope that you will punish him for his daring."

"I will do my best to punish him," answered Fedora, and a close observer could have seen a momentary compression of the red lips.

CHAPTER IX

Well, the Princess Fedora had gone to the Countess Olga's arm and equipped. That is, she had taken especial pains with her toilet, a thing she would have done in any case, but which she did with the more art now than she would have been able to do at any previous time, because of some things the Countess Olga had said to her.

It will be remembered that the countess assisted one day at the toilet of the princess. Now the countess was at the same time an admirer of beauty, an adept in the art of attracting men, and a woman of plain speech. Thus, then, she could not enough admire Fedora, as revealed during the progress of the toilet, and she went into such rhapsodies over her as were perhaps embarrassing, but were also instructive, as coming from a person of the experience of the countess.

In the same breath that she would decant upon this or that charm of the princess, she would also speak of its effect under given circumstances on the so-called stronger sex. To the countess, in a word, the only use of beauty was as a factor in the subjugation of men.

And Fedora listened to her with a certain sense of shame at having the matter so bluntly discussed, but with a new light breaking in upon her at each word. Oh, she had understood the power of physical beauty before, and had counted upon her own as an important aid in the entangling of Loris Ipanoff; but the methods of manipulating beauty to specific ends, as revealed in the discourse of the countess, had never before occurred to her.

In such matters a hint is all a woman needs to enable her to speculate to the last extreme of possibility, and thus it was that Fedora parted with the countess that afternoon a much more dangerous woman to Loris Ipanoff, or any other man, than she had been before.

The evening she was to go to the salon of the Countess Olga she puzzled Marka not a little by the little changes she made in her usual mode of dressing. Marka was an uncommonly astute young woman, but there was a something

in the manner of her mistress that night which she could not fathom.

She made the changes as bidden, wondering why at first, and then wondering at the effect afterward. There was so little apparent difference between the toilet of now and of therefore, and yet such a difference in the total effect.

Let there be no misunderstanding, however; the Princess Fedora did nothing any less modest than she had ever done, though it may be admitted that she had one primary object in view, and that was the touching of the physical senses of Loris Ipanoff—any other man she did not consider.

When the toilet was finished she looked at herself in the mirror, and then turned to Marka, who stood contemplating her with admiring eyes. "Well, Marka, what is the result?"

"Oh, madam, I never saw you look so before."

"What is the difference?"

Marka shook her head slowly and tried to formulate the idea that was in her mind.

"I cannot tell—I do not know. Madam is always beautiful, always superb; but tonight there is something so soft, so round, so—but madam will be offended."

"I will not, I promise you. Go on."

"So voluptuous."

"Ah-h!" with a long-drawn breath, was Fedora's comment on this word.

But it was the right word. One looking at her realized first of all that she was a woman of flesh and blood. Somehow every provocative curve and dimple had been brought to light, and as the woman stood before the mirror and contemplated herself with the pride of conscious physical beauty, she seemed to palpitate with life and passion.

Fedora at that moment felt surer of herself than she had ever done before, and she was too human not to take an infinite pleasure in herself.

When the Count Rouvel came to escort her to the salon she watched him, and almost smiled to see the start he suppressed at sight of her. As for the count, he was an elderly man, and he had his warning from Fedora at the very outset; so he was not going to be guilty of any folly; but nothing could prevent him from blessing the good luck that had made him the privileged escort of this ravishing, glowing vision.

"Is it permitted me to compliment you, princess?" he asked.

"What you like," she answered, laughingly.

"All the graces have attended at our toilet tonight."

But he might have spared himself words; his looks told more than they did, and Fedora was satisfied. She was satisfied, too, with the impression made on the assemblage when she entered the salon. She knew the meaning of the sudden hush, followed by a subdued murmur, as she passed along to where Olga stood awaiting her. The fervor of Olga's whispered praise was gratifying, too, and she accepted the eager homage of the men as they crowded around her as further assurance that she had not striven in vain; but then came Loris Ipanoff, for whom it had all had been done, and, in his impassive face and calm eye, there was assurance of nothing.

If Lasinsky had been the man she was endeavoring to impress she would have had no cause for complaint, for, in the first flash of his dark eye she had read passionate approval, and in every word and tone subsequently there had been infatuation. She noticed him especially, not because he was alone in his adoration, but because chance had revealed to her that he disliked Ipanoff.

She had a slight fear, but only a slight one, that Ipanoff might suspect her, though there was no reason why he should, inasmuch as her betrothal to Vladimir was not a publicly known matter. She watched his face when

he was presented for some sign of recognition or suspicion, but the face she studied was as inscrutable as a face of marble, and she turned her eyes away baffled, and there was in her heart a singular feeling of fear of the man.

She was glad that he turned at once to the Countess Olga after bowing to her, for she wished the opportunity to study him before engaging in an attempt to bring him to her feet. And she did study him, listening to his words, taking furtive glances at him, and registering even the tones of his voice, and, in the meantime, keeping up a brisk fire of talk with the throng about her.

To say that she fathomed the man with that brief study, or even that she formulated the opinion she did reach in regard to him, would be false. She hardly had an opinion; she had only what is called in women an instinctive feeling, but it was strong enough to give her a sense of security in the thought of entering the lists against him.

And what shall be said of the effect of her on him? Was there no effect? Loris Ipanoff was an unusual man, with an unusual mental poise, but for all that he was a man; and as a man quite susceptible to the influences brought to bear against his senses as any other man. There might be a difference in the degree of resistance exerted by him against the influences; but it is safe to say that the pulses of the inflammable Pole beat no quicker at sight of Fedora's sensuous charms than his did. Only he would neither show his feelings, nor willingly yield to them.

He studied Fedora as she had studied him—furtively; if that can be called furtive, which is only casual and incidental. His interest in her were as nearly as possible the same that he had felt in the bottle of green chartreuse the first time he had drunk of that delectable liquor. That had given him a new sensation, just as she had given him a new one in his experience of women. However, he had taken many glasses of chartreuse after the first one, but then he had had no preconceived notions against chartreuse.

So he listened to her, and she listened to him; she with a vital and he with a languid interest; she with intense hatred in her heart, and he with indifference in his; she wondering how she would make the first step, and he thinking he would avoid this woman who had the power to stir his blood so.

And in the meantime, there sat Lasinsky by the side of Fedora, completely enthralled, and watching jealously every side glance of hers, every uplifting of her long lashes, seeming to divine that in this, as in his, now abandoned passion for the Countess Olga, he had a serious rival in the impetuous Ipanoff. His hatred for his all-conquering rival was probably as intense and even more vicious than Fedora's, for the reason that his nature was more vicious.

On the other hand there was Olga, secretly overwhelmed with joy that Ipanoff really turned from Fedora to her with indifference, and at the same time dissatisfied that the two people she at that moment was most interested in should not be in rapport.

Some pious person had said that change is an instrument of the devil. It may be so, and if so he may have aided the Countess Olga to put it in the way of Fedora at the moment when she most needed it.

The conversation had turned on music, and Lasinsky, who was a musician of no ordinary ability, was condemning the famous toredor song for its meretricious qualities. Fedora was defending it with wit and ability. Olga, listening for a moment, heard what they were saying, and interrupted:

"You have never heard the toredor song, Lasinsky!"

"Never heard it!"

"Never properly rendered."

"Parbleu! I have heard—"

"It does not matter whom you have heard, since you have not heard the princess sing it."

"Oh," said Lasinsky, turning to Fedora with genuine delight at musical. "I beg that you will discover that she, too, was musical. I beg that you will dispel my ignorance. Sing the song for us."

"Readily," answered Fedora, frankly, "not in the hope of changing your opinion, for the countess is good enough to overrate my ability, but because I never refuse to sing when I am asked. Unfortunately I do not play my own accompaniments without my music, and my music is not here."

Lasinsky could have wished for nothing better, and was about to offer his services; but it was here that the devil thrust in his cloven foot, and made way for the chance which the Countess Olga seized.

"Ipanoff plays the accompaniment. You shall have no excuse. Come, Ipanoff, you must be useful."

What was there to be done? Lasinsky could not cut Ipanoff's throat, as he would have liked to do, and Ipanoff could not refuse so simple a request. As a matter of fact he had no thought of refusing. It was a simple chance; but the best chances always are simple.

He offered his arm to Fedora, and she took it with a smile, though it chilled her to lay her hand on that arm which in all probability had urged the blade that let out the life-blood of her betrothed.

Her hand trembled for an instant, and after that was quite calm, and she was ready to essay the task of entraining this impassive, self-contained man, who at once inspired her with hate by what he had done, and with fear by the sense of restrained power and passion, with which he impressed her.

He led her to the piano, and sat down, turning immediately to the keys, and running his fingers over them. It was not discourteously done, but indifferently, and Fedora was chagrined. She was not discouraged, however, and the difficulty of impressing the man only increased her dislike of him, and made her more resolute to conquer him.

"I am whimsical," she said, laughing; "I cannot sing in gloves."

"True genius is always whimsical," he answered, carelessly, touching the keys in a way that suggested laughter to Fedora, and made her wince with the feeling that he did not think it worth while to take her seriously.

"Oh, I think not," she answered, without the least appearance of irritation. "It is no more an indication of genius than indifference is an indication of superiority, though either may be used as a cloak to hide the lack of the quality one desires to gain credit for having."

He looked up without stopping his rippling movement on the keys, and she saw his face lighted up by an appreciative smile. She looked back into his eyes, and laughed frankly. His smile and her laugh were like a mutual confession, and seemed to say, "quits."

That exchange alone, she knew, had put them in rapport, but there was more than that between them. He had looked into her eyes—not into her face, but, actually, into the depths of her eyes, and there is something electric at the bottom of any person's eyes—a shock as well when the eyes are those of the other sex, and a thrill when they belong to a woman as beautiful as Fedora.

The shock and the thrill he had received, and he turned again to the piano less self-contained. She drew a deeper breath, and for a moment her eyes swam—she had pushed out into deep water.

All this while she had been leisurely taking off the gloves which, she had said, impeded her singing. Have you ever noticed a woman, with a shapely hand and arm, removing a mousquetaire glove—one of the untanned sort, the clinging, wrinkling kind?

Loris Ipanoff was rather conscious than seeing as Fedora drew her gloves off, but the dimpled,

gleaming elbow was there, the rounded, gradually revealed arm, the taper wrist and slender fingers. And above them the half-smiling, preoccupied, ingenuous face.

And after that look into the depths there came to him a sense of atmosphere surrounding her, and reaching out to him, a sense of curves and undulations, of softness and sensuousness, of subtle perfume, and, unconsciously to himself, his trifling with the keys took on a different measure, and was softer and less rippling, more vague and less ordered.

"I am ready," she said, softly, and, without looking up, he broke into the accompaniment.

The song is familiar now; it was new then. It was of a character to suit the warmth of Fedora's nature, and she rendered it with a feeling, a verve, which made it all her own. It is a song that calls for abandon and fire—Fedora lacked neither of these qualities, and she put both into her rendition of the song then.

Her voice was well cultivated, full, and rich, and the whole assemblage listened with delight. Loris Ipanoff sat where every tone could vibrate through his nervous system, he sat where he could feel the perfumed warmth exhaled, now from her round cheek, as she swayed toward him under the passion of the music, now from her white arm as it rose and fell in spontaneous gesture, and now from the heaving bosom as it swelled sensuously with the throbbing strains.

And then, as the music alone gained possession of her, she seemed to forget him, forget everything, and half turned away, unconsciously resting one hand, with the lightness of a winged Psyche, on his arm. Such a little thing! but, ah!

It was a strong arm, and the hand rested on it for barely two seconds ere it was snatched consciously away, but for the while that it was there the man was all but palsied, and almost reeled in his seat.

The song ceased; there was silence for a moment, as if the listeners were under a spell, and then there came a murmur increasing into a thunder of applause, telling distinctly of spontaneity. Under cover of the noise she bent laughingly over Loris, and said, accusingly:

"That was unkind of you!"

"What?" and he turned so suddenly to look at her that her breath swept his eyes before she could draw her face away.

"You dropped a note, and a musician like you does that only on purpose."

"I assure you I did not. It would be contemptible. If I dropped a note—but really I think you must be mistaken."

"I thought perhaps you were having a joke at my expense."

"Oh, it would have been unpardonable."

"But you played the bar so," and she hummed the bar she referred to.

"Yes, and it is right," he answered at once.

"No, no; it should go so," and again she hummed.

"I will admit that your version is an improvement," he said, scarcely taking his eyes from her face; "but it differs from the correct score."

She laughed, and said, gayly: "Obstinate as a man."

"Oh, but the score will decide," he answered quickly.

"But we have no score here to refer to, as you very well know."

"I have it at home," said he.

"So have I," and she laughed incredulously, as if she knew he was only insisting against his better knowledge.

"But my score," said he, "was given me by the maestro himself, and must be correct."

"Given you by the maestro himself?" she cried, eagerly. "Oh, I would like to see that."

"If you will let me I will bring it to you."

"Let you? I beg of you. Come Thursday; I receive that evening. No, I cannot wait so long. Come tomorrow afternoon. That is, and her manner suddenly lost its eagerness and frankness, and became cold and formal, as if she realized that she had been too unconventional, "that is if you have nothing better to do."

"I shall come, if I may," he said, quickly.

By this time they were surrounded, and Fedora was receiving such compliments as in other days she had delighted to secure; but now they only tired her, for the strain of acting had been more than she had counted on. However, she had been successful, or hoped so; for she realized that a man like Ipanoff would be likely to have a soberer second thought, and might, on reflection, decide to avoid the trap she had set for him. Well, so that he did not detect the ruse, it would not matter if he did not come on the morrow. She knew that she could not fail now, and if not to-morrow, it would be some other day.

She was urged to sing again, but refused, and not long after begged the countess to excuse her. She would not remain to jeopardize her success.

"Artful one!" whispered the smiling countess, "you will not make yourself too cheap. But you are right. I would do the same. Let me come to see you tomorrow, May I?"

"How can you ask? Oh, to-morrow! I have an engagement in the afternoon. Any time but then."

"Then it shall be the day after. I must see you soon to feast upon your beauty. Do you know that all the men are wild?"

"If I were to believe you, yes," laughed Fedora, taking the arm of Count Rouvel. "I shall expect to see you, Count Lasinsky, at my salon on Thursday night. And you and you—all of you who will do me the honor," she said, bowing comprehensively.

She noticed that Ipanoff stood coldly and impassively apart, but she gave him no special sign, merely including him with the others. She had learned a great deal of the man as she stood beside him at the piano. Perhaps in some vital matters she knew him better than he knew himself.

As she rode home with the Count Rouvel there was an exultant tone in all she said which impressed him, but which he could not fathom, and which he explained in the simplest way possible. She was elated with her reception. That, of course, was natural, but altogether she bewitched the diplomat, for underneath all, he could detect an extraordinary self-poise, which gave the lie to the theory that she was elated with a mere drawing-room success.

Ah, if he were only younger! was the burden of his thoughts as he rode to his own home after taking leave of her. It is singular what confidence elderly men have in the youth that is gone by forever. When Fedora was alone in her boudoir with Marka, in other words, when the necessity for restraint was past, for she did not consider Marka at all, she raised her arms, and, before the waiting maid could catch it, had let the heavy fur cloak slip off, and fall to the floor.

And there she stood with uplifted arms in front of the mirror, devouring herself with an exultation that came of a knowledge of her own power, derived through her marvelous beauty; and not beauty of form and fullness alone, but of conscious, governable sensuousness.

"Am I beautiful, Marka?" she cried, turning a glowing cheek and sparkling eye on the astonished maid.

"Wonderful," said Marka, in a half-hushed voice.

"Ah, yes, I am beautiful, and I know it, and there is my power. And, Marka, the men gathered around me tonight like lapping wolves around a pool of blood, hungering for me, and I was not afraid."

"Oh, madam!" whispered Marka.

"It is not like me, is it, Marka? I used to be afraid of attracting the men too much. Ah, yes, I am beautiful, and when a man looks down into my eyes the spell is upon him, and he is lost. I know it."

"Oh, madam!"

"Do I frighten you, Marka? Have no fears. I am not out of my senses, but I must talk, and if not to you, to whom then? But there, I am tired. Put me to bed as you would a child, Marka. Oh, I am tired, tired but I have won."

She sank upon a fauteuil, not so much as a tired woman as a

langorous one, and dreamed of what she would do on the morrow if he came to her. She felt like a sorceress with a newly found magic power, and the shame she had thought to feel in using her physical charms to entrap the murderer of Vladimir, she did not feel, but was only triumphant.

Ah, is was such a victory! He was so strong and masterful, and she had felt afraid of him until she had seen him under the spell of herself, until she had felt him tremble under her light touch, until she had seen his eyes sinking down into the depths of her own.

Now, now she would lure him on until he destroyed himself. Vladimir should be avenged at last. She felt it, she knew it. He might reflect, and keep away from her to-morrow; but he would have to yield at last, and come to her, and then—and, she would enjoy playing with him.

And presently Marka did put her in her bed, and folded the silken sheets about her as if she slept like one, dreaming, perhaps, of her newly-born power, but sleeping peacefully and sweetly, and waking in the morning with a smile upon her lips.

This day he was coming, and she dressed for him as she had never dressed for her lover. Ah, she had always been good enough for him as she was, no matter how that was. How gentle, composed, and assured that love had been.

Powder, rouge, the black pencil she had no need for, but there were some arts practiced in her toilet—such arts as prolong youth, and make it conscious of itself.

There was the bath. She was a Russian as well as young, and she enjoyed her bath as a gourmet might a truffle. First there was the hot water, steaming in its marble basin, and she emerged dripping from that only to plunge into the cold bath, which imparted to her flesh the velvety firmness of the child's. After that a brisk rubbing and then the gentle massage.

For the rest there was no haste, and, all warm and glowing, she let Marka unfold her in soft, silken robes, and thus she ate and dreamed. She no longer had occasion to plan what she would do when she was with him. It was as if she had eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and was alive with consciousness.

But she did not neglect those little arts of the toilet which she had used with such effect the night before. Today she was more daring, though the same artifices were not resorted to. This time she would see him by daylight, and alone.

Marka comprehended better today what was required, albeit still puzzled and distressed to know the reason for what was done, and she responded skillfully to the directions given her, so that when her work was done, and her mistress, half reclining in an easy-chair, demanded smilingly the effect, she could answer:

"It is marvelous."

Then, in the light of her new knowledge, Fedora had some changes made in her boudoir, for it was there she would receive Loris if he came.

(To be continued)

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