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"The White Witch of Mayfair," "The World Masters," &c.

BOOK I.—BEFORE THE STORM.

FOR RUSSIA OR JAPAN?

Victor Erskine, Englishman, and Orsino Lugaud, Corsican, were foster brothers. Erskine, after five years of slavery, had become a wealthy man, but Orsino, although he had invented a wonderful submarine, L'Anonyme, and had risen to the rank of Lieutenant-commander in the French Marine, was desperately poor. Moreover, he was desperately discontented with the meagre reward in rank and pay conferred on him in recognition of his invention.

The two foster brothers met by chance at Marseilles, and after confiding in each other thought of a plan which would mean a fortune for both. At the end of the interview Orsino signed an agreement to sell himself and the submarine to Erskine for 25,000 francs.

A month later the papers were full of an account of the loss of the submarine, which had had orders to reach as great a depth as possible, and had never returned to the surface. The submarine possessed what was known as a "water ray" apparatus, by means of which any object could be seen while the boat was under water and quite invisible.

Some time had passed when the story continues; and Sir Victor was a man of fortune. He had a young half-brother, a struggling barrister, who was deeply in love with a beautiful girl, Leone Lonsdale. Alleging that she was in the direst straits for money—that her love and her future were at stake—she induced the young barrister to promise to forge a cheque for £1000 in the name of his brother, Sir Victor.

As soon as he had written the fatal cheque and put it away in his pocket, Erskine was visited by Mr Rufus Pulker, of a famous firm of solicitors, who asked him if he would take up the Yondall case.

The Hon. Forester Yondall was, curiously enough, charged with forgery; Erskine bravely defended him, and he was discharged. Elated with triumph, and with the knowledge that his honour need not be sacrificed by the negotiation of the forged cheque, he left the court, but when he joined his friends he was horrified to find that his pocket containing the forged cheque had been completely cut away. The cheque was gone.

The cheque had been stolen by the Princess Zaida, Doroëna's spy, Estcourt, with the aid of Lavley, Arthur Erskine's clerk. The Princess, having possession of it, hoped to use it to strengthen her power over Sir Victor.

The news that Zebrowski, the famous anarchist, had escaped from prison, filled the Princess with alarm, for he was her most pitiless enemy, and her life was no longer safe.

Count Boris Volstel, Secretary to the Russian Embassy, and virtually the head of the Russian Secret Service in England, confided to Princess Zaida that as war was imminent Zebrowski could not be allowed to be free, and that she had been given the task of tracking him down and betraying him. Although horrified at the suggestion, she was bound to agree, for refusal would mean at least imprisonment for life. Then she remembered Falcone Lugaud, the famous Corsican outlaw, who was her slave, and determined to seek his help. That evening Falcone unexpectedly called to see her.

Falcone was the brother of Orsino, the lieutenant who had sold himself and his

submarine to Sir Victor. Hearing that Sir Victor had practically sold the submarine to the Japanese, the Corsicans had decided to steal it again and use it for Russia. The Princess was let in to the plot. Then, when she had told Falcone about Zebrowski, he promised to go himself to the meeting, to which the Secret Society of the Seven had summoned her, and if necessary get rid of Zebrowski. When Falcone left it was with the promise that the Princess would shortly become his wife. The Princess decided to call on Sir Victor that night and take with her the forged cheque.

CHAPTER IX.

PRINCESS AND BRIGAND.

It would only unduly delay the progress of the narrative to repeat in detail the conversation which took place between her highness and the man to whom, not as diplomatist or political intriguer, but just as natural woman, she had so strangely come to love. The reason is that this conversation consisted mainly in the telling by Signor Falcone to his delightedly-wondering companion of the stealing of the submarine. With most of the details of that singular transaction the reader is already familiar.

In addition to this he told her, in picturesque language, and with speaking gesture, the story of the two years' career of smuggling and treasure-hunting at the bottom of the sea, which was the true origin of Victor Erskine's quick-won wealth. She listened in rapt silence to the telling of the wonderful tale. When he at last made an end of it, he took a long pull at the champagne which she had given him in a goblet of Venetian glass, rose to his feet, and asked her:

"And now, Highness, tell me what do you think of the story your slave has told you about the Monte Cristo of the new century?"

She replied, lying back on her cushions and rewarding him with a bewildering smile and a flash of undisguised admiration in her eyes:

"How can I tell you, Falcone—since it is too marvellous for description? But, much as I have wondered at it, there is something else that I wonder at still more, and that is why you should have come all this way to tell the story to me, and to reveal secrets which must be worth the price of a man's life."

"Ah, yes!" he replied, beginning to walk up and down the room with long, quick strides. "That, of course, I knew you would ask, but you would not have had me spoil a good story by telling the most interesting part of it first. Now I will tell you, and it is in this way. Orsino, my brother, and Adrien Gevaux, his second in command, as well as three others of the French crew, who sold their honour and loyalty, as some would say, for Victor Erskine's gold, had repented them sorely, the more so because this

Erskine becomes more grasping and tyrannical every day. Only a month ago he shot with his own hand one of the sailors who sought to escape from his tyranny. That man was a Corsican, Highness, and Corsicans do not forgive or forget that sort of thing.

"Then there is another matter," he continued, stopping in his walk and facing her. "You know that before many weeks that black cloud in the East must break in the thunders and lightnings of war, and we have learnt—for we are not without our intelligence department, we free-lances of the mountains—that our master, thinking of nothing but the increase of his miserable money, is about to hire this sea-snake of ours, which is the most terrible weapon of destruction that the hand of man ever guided through the seas, to those yellow barbarians who are about to fight the ally of France, and it may be France herself. Rather than aid in such treachery to our blood and country as that we will revolt against our tyrant, and the stolen submarine shall be restolen."

"Most excellent, my brave and faithful Falcone!" interrupted the Princess, also rising from her couch and clasping her hands behind her.

While he had been speaking she had been thinking with rapid intensity. The kindly Fates had called to her side a protector who would be faithful to the death. With his aid she could defy alike the vengeance of Zebrowski and the anger of her Russian masters. A dazzling prospect suddenly opened out before her. Every other plan and project in her life, even her recent determination to marry Victor Erskine and his millions, sank down into insignificance as she saw herself, by a brilliant flash of inspiration, Queen of the Underseas and ruler of a realm wider than all the lands of earth.

Her resolution was taken instantly. She went to him, and to his delighted amazement, laid her hands on his shoulders, and, looking up into his face with rosy cheeks and melting eyes, said softly:

"Falcone, do you remember what you said that day when I paid my ransom?"

"Highness," he replied, drawing back over so little, partly in astonishment and partly because her touch had thrilled through his nerves and veins as an electric shock might have done, "do you think it would be possible for a man to whom the golden gates were opened for a moment to forget the sight of heaven?"

"And what you said came from your heart, and not only from your brain? Your humour was not only a jest of gallantry, was it?"

"I have condemned men to death, Highness, I have spoken words that

have made widows and orphans, and once I asked for death myself, but the most solemn words that ever passed my lips were those which you have been gracious enough to recall."

"Then you still love your sometime captive as you said you did then?"

"It is not love. How could I dare to use such a word without the permission I dare not hope for, yet worship, is not forbidden me?"

He spoke almost in whispers and with halting words. His mighty muscles were relaxed, she could feel his frame trembling under the light touch she had laid upon him. His lips were dry and his eyes were burning as though he had been suddenly smitten by a fever. The man's whole being told her of blind love and utter devotion, and in her own being the response was not wanting. Her womanhood seemed to thrill in unison with his manhood, and under the swift wave of emotion, which suddenly flooded her senses the whole social fabric, the edifice which she had entered as a paradise to find a prison, sank down and vanished like a house under which a quicksand had opened. The shams and conventions of an insincere and artificial existence vanished, leaving her face to face with the most elemental facts of Nature—that Falcone was a man and that she was a woman—and that they loved each other.

"There are few things forbidden to those who have the strength and daring to take them, my Falcone!"

He felt the pressure of the soft hands upon his shoulder increased by ever so little as she drew herself a shade nearer to him. The scent of her hair rose to his nostrils; he felt her breath in the silky hairs of his coal-black beard, the gleam of her eyes dazzling him for a moment, and the next everything earthly had been forgotten, and they two stood alone in the world, lips pressed on lips, and heart beating against heart.

No longer princess and brigand, but just a man and woman who loved each other.

"And now, my Falcone," she began again as they were seated side by side on the couch, "as I am going to be an outlaw's wife, it is only fair that I should help you to steal the stolen and rob the robber. Then you and I will be Lord and Lady of the Underseas together, and we will fight for Holy Russia, and, if need be, France; but also for our own hand. But my share you must leave to me, and that reminds me you have not told me yet why you are in London."

"It is simply explained, dearest and loveliest," he replied; "I came in obedience to the summons of our master that was, Orsino is here also, and so is a cunning little piece of machinery