

without which the Sea-Snake is like one of her namesakes with a broken back. You see, it would not do to risk anyone running away with her, so we have left her lying helpless at the bottom of our little harbour.

"Now, what we have come for is to describe her working and her powers to two of these little yellow men in London, and sign bonus to take them out to the East secretly, so that no one, save the heads of their own Government, shall know even of the existence of this monster—for she is a monster nearly two hundred feet long and thirty feet broad in the middle—which shall move about the depths of the waters, swift, silent, and unseen, striking its deadly blows at its helpless and unsuspecting enemies."

"But they must never see it, my Falcone," she said softly, but with a glint in her eyes which was anything but a love-light. "What we have to do must be done quickly, almost instantly. I know this Victor Erskine you speak of, a man without patriotism, honour, or human kindness, and I have the means to bring him and his to disgrace, to dishonour so black that he could never hold his head up again in the world, without whose favours his millions would be worthless to him. Leave me to deal with him! Tell me the names of these two yellow men who want to buy you and your Sea-Snake for the service of barbarism, and do you and Ursino get back to Corsica as quickly as you can, take your vessel away to some safe place on the western coast of Italy, and then tell me by telegraph how I can join you. See these yellow men and sign your bonds first, so that Victor Erskine may suspect nothing, then vanish, and let your Sea-Snake do the same."

As she ceased speaking there came a knock at the door. Falcone rose and went to one of the windows, and as the Princess said "Entrez" Jacqueline came in and handed her a square, white envelope, saying that a gentleman had left it with the hall porter, and said that there was no answer.

When Zaida looked at the envelope she saw that it was sealed with red wax, and that the device was composed of seven tiny daggers. Her cheeks paled and her lips hardened, for she knew already, without looking, what the envelope contained. Then, as she tore it open with trembling fingers, she said in a voice so strangely altered that the Corsican looked round with a start:

"Falcone, we have been confessed lovers for nearly half an hour. Do you love me well enough to kill a man, perhaps two men, for my sake?"

"Do you doubt me already to ask such a question," he exclaimed coming towards her with outstretched hands. "Tell me who would injure you, my most beautiful, and think of them as already dead."

"Then let us read this together," she replied, going to him and allowing his arms to enfold her. She took a sheet of notepaper out of the envelope and opened it. At the top there was a reproduction of the seal, also in red.

"Ah!" exclaimed Falcone, "the Seal of Seven! What have you to fear from them?"

Then he took the paper from her hand and read:

"Zaida Dorosma is hereby summoned under the Seal of Seven to meet the Seven in Council, assembled to answer certain matters with which she is vitally concerned. A brougham will await her at half-past ten to-night. She will neglect the summons at her peril.

"Sealed for the Seven."

There was another red seal, instead of signature, showing a hand armed with a dagger.

"And now what does this mean?" he asked tenderly, after they had read the ominous communication twice over. "What have you done to receive such a summons as this? Political, of course."

"Yes," she replied. "It is one of the results, one of the perils of my slavery to Russian officialism. I am a true Russian and a faithful daughter of the Little Father, but I will be a slave to the bureaucracy no longer if you will give me release. As for this—I will tell you."

Then she told him the story of Zebrowski, and of the part she had been forced to play in securing his arrest and conviction, and when she had finished the story she said, turning in his arms

and looking up at him with laughing eyes:

"But now there is another danger to tell you of, my Falcone. It is not so much this man's hate that I fear. It is his love, for he does love me—as the tiger loves his mate. It is not death that I fear at his hands. It is a slavery worse than Russia's harshest bond—"

"What! That fiend Zebrowski?" exclaimed Lugand, growing suddenly white under the stress of his suddenly-aroused fury. "You asked me just now if I would kill a man for love of you. Well, you shall see. I know something of this man, and it is not the first time that I have seen the Seal of Seven. Remain at home to-night, I will keep your appointment for you, or if you have any other engagement, keep it without fear, for no harm shall come to you, dearest and loveliest, while the Falcon of the cliffs and mountains lives to protect you. Can you trust me?"

"Have I not to-day trusted everything to you?" she replied, putting her arm round his neck and drawing his head down till their lips met. "If I cannot trust you now, my beloved, then truly it were better that I were dead."

CHAPTER X.

A MOMENTOUS BARGAIN.

While this conversation was taking place in Palace-mansions another of a very different, but possibly of not less far-reaching, nature was being held in one of the private arbitration rooms in Middle Temple-buildings.

There were three people seated at a green leather-covered table. The straight, black hair, sallow complexion, high cheekbones, and slanting eyes of two of them left no doubt as to their nationality. The elder of the two had the heavy moustache and fairly full chin beard which are the signs of noble descent in the Land of the Rising Sun. He was Count Kashama, a high official of the Japanese Legation in London. The clean-shaven, heavy-jawed man at the other end of the table was Rear-Admiral Naramo, commander-in-chief of

the Japanese torpedo flotilla. The Englishman sitting between them was Victor Erskine.

"Well, gentlemen," Erskine was saying—it happened at the very moment when Zaida Dorosma felt the arms of her outlaw lover closing round her—"I think we may now consider the preliminaries arranged between us, and I do not see that there are any difficulties left in the way of our coming to an arrangement. It is agreed," he went on, taking up a page of memoranda from the blotting-pad in front of him, "first, that you shall have the immediate opportunity of inspecting the submarine and of making a trial trip in her. Second, that my present commander and his two lieutenants shall sign bonds to navigate the vessel to any port or place of call that you may select. Third, that Admiral Naramo, with such crew as he may select, shall replace the present crew on completion of purchase; and lastly, that the sum of one million sterling in cash, cheques and bonds, together with formal ratifications of the concessions I have asked for, shall be given to me personally by Count Kashama when the vessel is handed over. Upon these points I think we are finally agreed!"

"I think so," said the Count. "You have made a hard bargain with us, sir, but when a people has to fight for its very existence, as we shall have to do before long, we must not think of money. Our necessity has been your opportunity, and I have pleasure in congratulating you on the ability with which you have taken advantage of it. And now, if Admiral Naramo has nothing more to say, I think we may exchange notes."

"There is just one little point that has occurred to me," said the Admiral, turning towards Erskine.

"As regards these men of yours. No doubt they are very worthy fellows in their way, but in such a very serious matter as this, a transaction in which, if known, would involve us in the gravest consequences, we cannot proceed with too great caution."

"Surely, Admiral, it is scarcely as terrible a transaction as all that," said

Erskine, with a somewhat uneasy smile, for the quick-witted Oriental had raised the very point which he had been at the utmost pains to conceal. "Personally, I cannot see that it is anything more than a bargain made between three private gentlemen. I have an article for sale, you are willing to buy it. What you propose to do with it, when you have bought it, does not concern me in the least."

"But pardon," replied the Admiral, putting his folded arms on the table, and looking Erskine keenly in the eyes. "If you will recall the facts for a moment, I think you will admit that I do not exaggerate. What do you think, Count," he went on, looking along the table, "of the effect of such a transaction becoming known?"

"But how could it become known, my dear sir!" interrupted Erskine, somewhat impatiently.

"I think I see what the Admiral means," replied the Count. "There will be three men on board who will know all the circumstances, and who may be hostile to our cause."

Erskine leant back in his chair and said, after a moment's silence:

"These men have taken certain risks and done certain work, for which they have been most liberally paid. So far we are quits. They have consented to exchange my service for yours."

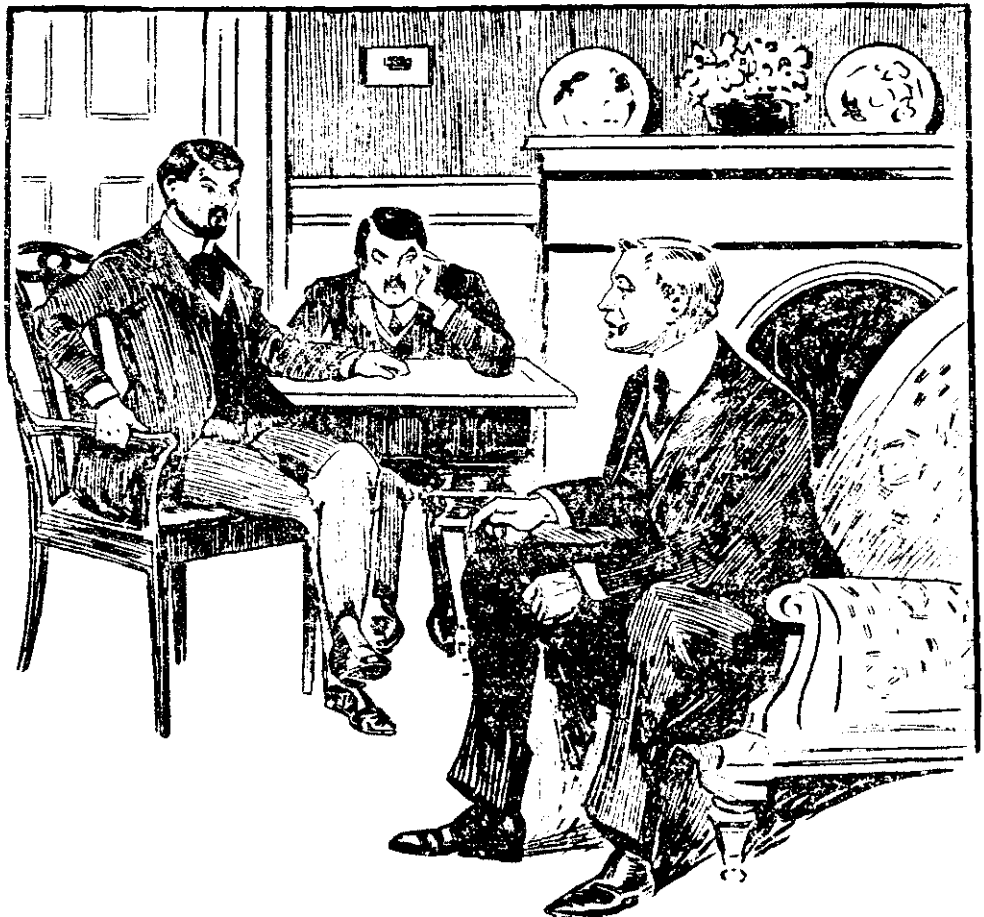
"Very good, then," said the Count. "I think we understand each other on that point; and now, having disposed of it, we will conclude the negotiations as far as concerns this meeting."

It was a very business-like way of ending a meeting, if not four, of his most faithful servants, but Victor Erskine signed his note of acceptance with as little emotion as he would have signed a cheque for a hundred pounds in the ordinary course of his affairs.

CHAPTER XI.

PREPARING FOR ACTION.

After the events of the day it was perhaps natural that Princess Zaida found herself in what may fairly be described as a somewhat unsettled state



"I cannot see," said Sir Victor Erskine to the two Japanese, "that it is anything more than a bargain between two private gentlemen." He signed the note of acceptance with as little emotion as he would have signed a cheque for £100.