

of mind. She had all the confidence of her newly-plighted faith with Falcone, and she felt assured that she had now at her disposal a means of escape on perfectly honourable terms from the official tyranny which only that morning had condemned her by the lips of Boris Volstoi to a mission from which all that was best in her womanhood utterly revolted.

Then, again, a new future had suddenly opened before her, a future whose wild romance stood out in fascinating contrast with the monotonous round of social slavery from which there had appeared no escape. Better certainly a year or two such thrilling experiences as she was now looking forward to than an indefinite extension of the unsatisfying life that she had been leading.

Still, she felt that in her present state of mind a solitary dinner was an impossibility. To have dined with Falcone at Prince's or Verrey's or the Carlton would have been delightful, but hopelessly dangerous, and, moreover, she realised with a shudder, which was half a thrill of pride, that before morning he might possibly have fought for her life, and either have lost or won. That, too, was another source of not a little disquietude. Action of some sort was imperative, and suddenly she bethought herself of an invitation she had received the day before to join a select little skating party at the Prince's Rink. She looked at the little Louis Quinze clock on the mantel-shelf. It was nearly six, and the appointment was for nine. She rang the bell for Jacqueline, and ordered tea, at the same time telling mademoiselle to put out her skating costume, and see that her skates were in order.

By seven o'clock she had taken tea and dressed herself in the costume of a Russian peasant girl, the same in which she had more than once taken part incognito in skating carnivals in St. Petersburg and Moscow, and by this time she had exercised the privilege of her sex and changed her mind.

After all, she had many things to think about, and it was desirable that she should take quiet counsel with herself. It was quite possible that spies would be watching the entrance to the Mansions, and that anything that might be construed into an attempt at escape would be immediately notified to those who would be waiting to sit in judgment upon her, and that if she went to any public place, even a restaurant, in her own character, she would be followed; but no one in England had ever seen the ruddy-faced, brown-browed, square-shouldered peasant girl, dressed in the grey fur-trimmed jacket, short skirts, grey stockings, and high boots, who looked at her from out her mirrors. With her fur cap, her hair hanging in a long plait down her back and her coat over her shoulders, it would be easy for her to get from the entrance hall into a hansom without exciting any more attention than might be given to anyone going to the fancy dress ball at Covent Garden, which happened to be on that night.

Once at the rink she would be safe, for it would be impossible for any harm to come to her while there or while driving back home in an inconspicuous hansom, and, by morning, no doubt, Falcone would have kept his promise. So she rang for Jacqueline again, and told her to send up a little runner for her from the restaurant at eight o'clock.

But by half-past seven another diversion arrived in the shape of an envelope containing Mr. Lawley's card, with a pencilled request for the honour of an immediate interview.

"Send the man up at once," she said to Jacqueline, and within three minutes Mr. Lawley was standing inside the door of her drawing-room gazing with cringing wonder on the transformation which the change of dress and complexion had effected.

"You needn't be frightened," she said with a little laugh. "I'm only going to a fancy dress ball. What's the matter? I suppose you would hardly have come without orders unless it was something important."

"I should not have ventured to do such a thing, your Highness," replied the spy, "but I can assure your Highness that the matter to which I have ventured to call your Highness' attention—"

"I have no time for that sort of thing just now, Mr. Lawley," she interrupted him, impatiently. "Be good enough to tell me at once what it is."

"Certainly, your Highness, immediate-

ly. In obedience to your Highness' command I have kept strict watch on the movements of Sir Victor Erskine, Mr. Arthur Erskine, and Miss Leone Lonsdale, and I have come to report that this afternoon Sir Victor was closeted, if I may use the expression, for some hours in one of the arbitration rooms in Middle Temple Chambers with two foreign gentlemen who were recognised by Mr. Estcourt, who was assisting me, as Count Hayati, of the Japanese Legation, and a Japanese naval officer named Naramo who has for some time past been making visits, almost every day, to the Legation. Consequently, in view of the possible hostilities between Russia and Japan, I ventured to think it possible that your Highness would like to know of this meeting."

"It hardly concerns me personally," replied the Princess, carelessly, "but, at the same time, you were perfectly right to bring me the news, and I shall remember it as a proof of your zeal and intelligence. And now have you anything to tell me about the others?"

"Nothing, your Highness, I regret to say, except that Mr. Arthur Erskine and a friend of his, Mr. Mark Hillyer, lately returned from America, and reported to be enormously rich, are escorting Miss Leone Lonsdale and her sister, Miss Marian, to a skating party at Prince's Rink this evening, the young ladies being under the chaperonage of their aunt, Mrs. Maddison."

"Well, that is not very interesting, I am afraid," said Princess Zaida, smiling at the exaggerated formality of his words and manner; "but it happens that I am going to that skating party to-night for an hour or so until I go on to Covent Garden, but I should like to know if you can find out exactly what Sir Victor is doing to-night. I know, of course, that he has been at his chambers in North Audley-street for some time, and I want you to go at once and find out from his man what time this evening he will be at home, and if he will be alone. I shall not leave until nine, so when you have found out come back here and tell me. Here is some money for you. Take cabs if necessary."

She took a couple of sovereigns out of her purse, which was lying on the mantel-shelf, and gave them to him. He took them as a mortal might have taken a gift from a goddess, and when the door had closed behind him Princess Zaida lit a cigarette and began walking up and down the room thinking hard about many things, and, just before Jacqueline brought her soup up, she went into her dressing-room, unlocked a drawer in a little cabinet which stood beside the fire-place, took out a dainty five-chambered revolver, loaded it, and put it into the side pocket of her skirt. Then she went to the glass and looked at herself critically for a minute or two, turning this way and that, and posing in different attitudes very unlike her own.

"No," she said, when she had completed her survey. "I don't think any of them will recognise me, and, least of all, my good friend, Sir Victor. I don't know what some of my respected friends would say about an escapade like this, but there is no time to be lost, and, as for the conventionalities, they won't matter very much to me now. If I only catch my friend alone I think I can make the visit very well worth any risk there may be."

The prospect of the adventure raised her spirits, and she ate her dinner and drank her half bottle of Paul Roget '89 with excellent appetite. She was half-way through her after-dinner cigarette when Mr. Lawley returned with the announcement that Sir Victor Erskine would certainly be home by eleven, and, for all his man knew to the contrary, alone.

"Very well," said Princess Zaida, "now go back to your friend and tell him that a lady with whom Sir Victor has an appointment for to-morrow morning finds it absolutely necessary to see him to-night, and she is obliged to leave for Liverpool by the midnight express from Euston. You may also mention incidentally that he will lose nothing by admitting the lady who, of course, will be myself, without question. You may give him this to begin with, and tell him there is more to come. This one you may keep to yourself."

She took a couple of five-pound notes out of her purse, and gave them to him, saying:

"No, no, Mr. Lawley, you need not take the trouble to thank me; this is only payment for work done. Now go, please, and

have everything arranged. At half-past ten exactly I shall leave the rink, and you will be there. When you see me come out call me a cab, and, as I am getting into it, tell me whether I am to drive back here or to North Audley-street."

When Mr. Lawley had once more taken his leave Princess Zaida went to her dress-trunk, and took out the travelling cloak, into the pocket of which she had put the forged cheque for a thousand pounds. She transferred it to the inner pocket of her jacket, saying to herself with a little laugh which was not as musical as usual:

"I wonder how much that will be worth to-morrow morning if everything goes well."

## CHAPTER XII.

### A BLOODLESS DUEL.

Among all the gay and fantastic figures which made up the brilliant spectacle of the skating carnival that night, the handsome Russian peasant girl was among the most notable. She skated as though she had been accustomed to wear skates from the time that she had worn boots, and she played the character to such perfection that, with the exception of the very small and select party that she had been asked to join, the only people who discovered her identity were Count Boris Volstoi and his wife. It was a little after ten, and before half the company had arrived, that she had finished a waltz with the Count, and as they slid away to the refreshment-room she whispered to him:

"I must go almost immediately. I have heard from Zebrowski already. There is a meeting of the Seven to-night and I am summoned, and cannot tell you where it is to be, but if you will have some one to follow a brougham which will call for me at Palace Mansions at 11 o'clock, you will perhaps be able to find out. If not, and I am alive to-morrow morning, I will find means of letting you know."

He pressed the hand which lay on his arm to his side and whispered:

"I half doubted you this morning; now I believe. The carriage shall be followed and every means taken to protect you. You are risking much, but if we succeed this time Russia will not forget your devotion, and you may take it from me that the capture of Zebrowski shall mean your freedom and everything that the grace of the Little Father can grant you."

"I ask nothing better," she replied. "Now get me a cup of coffee and I will have my skates taken off and disappear. You must make my excuses for me. Anything will do. Say that I have sprained my ankle or something. I must get back and change."

She had her skates taken off and drank a cup of coffee with him. Then she went back and made her adieu to the party she had joined, then she said good-bye to the Lonsdales, congratulated Arthur Erskine on his brilliant victory in the

Yondail case, and disappeared amidst the now increasing crowd.

She put on her long cloak, set her fur cap straight, tucked away her long plait, and slipped unnoticed out into the street. A shabbily-dressed cab tout came towards her, touched his broken bowler, and said in Mr. Lawley's voice:

"Can I get you a cab, lady? There's a nice 'ansom just here."

She nodded and followed, and as he lifted her cloak over the wheel he whispered:

"It will be North Audley-street, High-ness."

"Tell the man to drive to North Audley-

street," she said aloud, adding the number, and the next moment she was rolling smoothly eastward, leaning back in the cab, and swiftly reviewing the field in which she was about to fight a duel with one of the keenest intellects in Europe.

Mr. Dawkins, the cerberus of Sir Victor's bachelor chambers, had been easily persuaded that his master told him that he should return alone because he was expecting a visit from a lady. Such mysterious visits had occurred before, and it was none of his business to inquire into their object. Moreover, he belonged to that class of domestic for whom the pleasant words printed on the face of a £5 note possess strong persuasive powers, especially when a second promise to pay is directly in view, and thus it came about that Princess Zaida found herself seated at a quarter to eleven in a cosy armchair in Victor Erskine's small but exquisitely furnished drawing-room, continuing her review of the situation.

She frankly confessed to herself that one of the principal objects of this very unconventional visit was money. In taking the course she had resolved to take, she would at once deprive herself of the very liberal income which was the price of her services to the Russian Government. Her private fortune was insignificant, and so she had decided that, as she no longer desired to marry Victor Erskine's millions, he should provide her with an adequate dowry to take to her outlaw husband.

She had also drawn her own conclusions from the news of the interview with the Japanese officials, and, as has been shown, they were entirely accurate. It was easy for her to see at a glance that Victor Erskine had deliberately sold Falcone and his comrades, and for such a crime as this no punishment, in her eyes, could be too severe.

Just as the clock ceased chiming 11, she heard the front door open. For a moment as she heard the steps on the steps on the stairs she felt that she was growing pale under her artificial tan. As Erskine entered the room she rose from the chair, and said, with a little smile at the look of amazement which crossed his face:

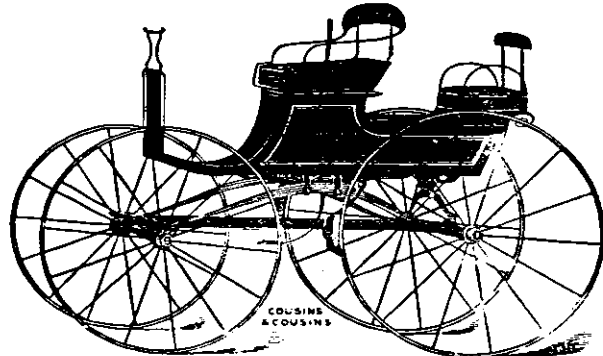
"Good evening, Sir Victor. I hope you will forgive this rather untimely and certainly unconventional visit."

## DO YOU WANT A BUGGY?

or a Vehicle of any description?

WE always keep a Large and Varied Stock of Up-to-Date Styles.

FIRST-CLASS WORK. REASONABLE PRICES. Write for our New Illustrated Catalogue containing over fifty different styles. Post Free. REPAIRS IN ALL BRANCHES A SPECIALITY.



COUSINS & COUSINS,

COACHBUILDERS,

LORNE STREET (near Public Library), AUCKLAND.