

For once in his life Victor Erskine was taken completely off his guard. He stopped and stared almost blankly at her; then, recovering his self-possession, he said rather stily:

"What, Princess Dorosma, and in what I may presume to be fancy dress! Well, I must confess that you do somewhat take me by surprise. However, as it is rather late for a bachelor to receive a visit from a lady of your rank and social position, you will permit me to ask you at once to what I am indebted for the honour of your presence."

He noticed that she was holding her hands behind her, so he allowed himself so far to forget his manners as to put his into his pockets.

"That," she replied, "is both a natural and a very proper question. As you have possibly divined already, my business with you is somewhat urgent, and, I regret to say, not of the most pleasant nature."

"Exactly what I should surmise," he said, with a distinct feeling of uneasiness. He was pretty well aware of the political side of his visitor's life, and his thoughts instinctively went back to the interview of the afternoon. "Then, if that is so," he continued, "it would be well for both of us if we get it disposed of as quickly as possible."

"Exactly," she replied, "and, therefore, I will come to the point at once, and if I do so with a somewhat brutal frankness you will understand that my only object is to make our interview as short as may be."

"Quite so," he said. "I'm a business man, and I am aware of your Highness's great ability in what I may call diplomacy. Pray proceed. Will you not take a seat?"

"No, thanks," she replied, "I'd rather stand. Well, to begin with, the reason for this costume of mine is that I have just come from the skating carnival at Prince's Rink. I met your brother there, and Miss Leone Lonsdale and her sister. What very beautiful girls they are, and what a charming contrast to each other. I quite expected to see you there. I should have thought Miss Leone's presence would have been a sufficient temptation."

"Excuse me," he said coldly, "this may be relevant, but really I cannot imagine what connection Miss Lonsdale can possibly have with any business between your Highness and myself."

"She happens to have a very close connection, as I will show you in a few moments," was the smiling reply. "In the first place, Sir Victor, it is no secret that you take a very much warmer interest in her than—"

"That, madam," interrupted Erskine almost roughly, "is a matter which cannot concern you, and which I cannot permit to be discussed."

"My dear Sir Victor," she said, with aggravating gentleness, "the less you interrupt me the sooner I shall be able to say 'good evening.' To put it quite plainly, you are in love with Leone Lonsdale, and, as far as you know, there is no objection on her part to share your name and brilliant fortune."

"Madam, once for all, if you persist in what I should call, if you were a man, this insolent intrusion upon my private affairs, I shall have to call my servant and have you shown to the door."

"You will do no such thing, Sir Victor," she said with a snap of her eyes, and a little smile which showed a gleam of white teeth, "for if you did, I should ask you in his presence, whether you are aware that your brother, one of the few human beings, I believe, for whom you have a deep and true affection, is a forger, and that the woman you wish to make your wife is his accomplice?"

She spoke very distinctly, and yet so rapidly that the terrible words had struck him like so many blows before he could interrupt her.

"If you have only come here to talk impossible nonsense like that," he exclaimed, taking a step towards her, "I will put you out of the room with my own hands."

His face was livid with sudden fury, and his hands went out as though he were about to put his threat into instant execution. Zaida made a swift motion with her right hand, and the next moment he was looking into the muzzle of her revolver.

"That will do, Sir Victor," she said in a low, tense voice. "Another step, and I shall fire. This is a matter of life and death, and if I have to shoot you it will be easy to make people believe that you lured me here, as I believe you have lured

others, and that I killed or disabled you for the very best of reasons."

It only needed a look at her steadily shining eyes, at her half-smiling, half-scornful lips to convince him that he had to do with a woman who herself had looked death in the face without flinching, and who would most assuredly back the word with the deed. He had too much to lose by the pressure of her finger on the trigger to wantonly provoke it. He had himself fought too many battles with fate to make the mistake of trifling with an enemy, especially when that enemy took the form of a resolute woman. He shrugged his shoulders, and, as he moved away towards an armchair, he said, in a voice from which every trace of politeness had vanished:

"Well, whether you are lying to me or not, you certainly command the situation, and so I suppose, I have got to listen to you. Make it as short as you can, please. I suppose it isn't much use asking you for proofs, and as your object, under the circumstances, can only be blackmail, you would shorten the proceedings considerably by stating the amount at once."

As he spoke he threw himself back in the chair, crossed his legs, and took out his cigarette case.

"I am glad to see you take matters so sensibly, Sir Victor," she laughed. "Now tell me, have you within the last week signed a cheque for a thousand pounds, payable to bearer?"

"Certainly not."

"And yet such a cheque with your signature as drawer is in existence."

"Frankly, I don't believe you."

Her left hand went into the breast-pocket of her jacket and she took out an envelope. She went towards him holding it out, still covering him with the revolver.

"I'm not going to ask you for your word of honour to give it back to me, but if you attempt to destroy it I shall shoot you. You will find it in that envelope," she said, handing it to him. It cost a supreme effort of will to keep his fingers steady as he opened the envelope and took out the cheque. As he looked at it she saw his eyes widen and his brows contract. There was no doubt about it. If he had not known that he never drew the cheque he would himself have sworn to the signature, and he knew that there was only one man alive who could have done so, the brother whom he had loved and trusted from boyhood, whose writing was so strangely like his own that such a perfect counterfeit would be quite easy to him. He put the cheque back into the envelope and handed it to her, saying, with a steadiness which commanded even her admiration:

"Whoever did it, it is an excellent imitation. Who did or did not draw the cheque is not the point. The question is, how much do you want for that piece of paper?"

There was no doubt in his mind now as to his brother's guilt. He remembered the cuts in the breast of Arthur's coat when he left the Old Bailey after the trial, the strange depression of his manner when he ought to have been jubilant with triumph, the immediate offer of £200 reward for the recovery of a pocket-book with all its contents—the inference seemed irresistible. Arthur had had the forged cheque in his pocket at the very time that he had used a trick of the law to save another forger from the penalty of his crime.

For the moment the shame and anger were lost in admiration for the magnificent nerve which had enabled him to do what he had done without betraying a sign of the torture which he must have been suffering. Brotherly love and trust were now, of course, impossible, but with such a man at command, great things might be done, and therefore that damning slip of paper was worth money.

"Well," he repeated, "how much do you want for it? There's no cause for hesitation. I've been blackmailed before."

"Thank you, Sir Victor," she said, with another snap of her eyes, "you seem to have forgotten your manners. I was going to ask you twenty thousand for it, the price is now fifty."

"Too much," he said, as quietly as though he were driving a bargain in mining shares or buying an option. "Call it thirty, and we can deal."

"Nonsense, Sir Victor," she laughed in reply. "I am not bargaining with you. I have named the price of this cheque. Really, I am surprised that you should condescend to trouble about a paltry fifty thousand pounds. You, who have made millions in a couple of years, pick-

ed them up from the bottom of the sea, as one might say, and who are now in a position to make bargains with empires."

He half rose from his chair, but the muzzle of the revolver rose as he did, and he sat down again. He was beaten, and he knew it. By whatever magic this beautiful, laughing sorceress who was standing before him, pistol in hand and finger on trigger, had got her knowledge, there was a fatal correctness which warned him that she was mistress of the situation in more ways than one. For a moment the intention was in his mind to risk everything in what would have been literally a leap for liberty, almost involuntarily his muscles tightened and his teeth clenched, but she was too quick for him. She took a couple of quick paces backward, took deliberate aim at his heart, and said, with an exasperating laugh:

"Oh, no, Sir Victor, you had much better sit still. Don't you see that if I had to shoot you this cheque, which I should tear up and fling on your body, would be the strongest possible proof of the story that I should have to tell. Now, don't you think you had better write me that cheque, and let me have it in exchange for this. To save accidents I shall also want you to give me a note stating exactly what it is in payment for. I don't suppose you would be so egregiously foolish as to stop your cheque, but still, if only to save you from the temptation I must insist upon that condition. The moment that your cheque is cleared I will return your note."

"Or ask another fifty thousand for it," he interrupted, with an undisguised sneer.

"Really, Sir Victor," she said, "I think your nerves must be a little upset. Don't you see that for a woman of my position in society such a thing would be quite impossible. Think for a moment. I present a cheque from you for fifty thousand pounds. That cheque is stopped. I sue you for it, and out the whole thing comes. It is only that unpleasantness which I wish to guard against, and I certainly do not want people asking why I should have a cheque for fifty thousand pounds from you, and besides there are other things. You would not care for Miss Lonsdale's name to be drawn into the transaction, to say nothing of your brother's. As for asking another fifty thousand for the letter, well, that would, of course, be the frankest of blackmail. You must see that I want the note, as the editors say, 'not necessarily for publication, but as a guarantee of good faith.'"

There was no mistaking the emphasis on the "necessarily," and Victor Erskine saw that there was nothing for it but surrender at discretion, and, after all, what was fifty thousand pounds to him in comparison with the ruin with which this beautiful enemy of his was manifestly able to threaten him? It was only the turn of a point or two on the markets, and that could easily be managed. The investing and the speculating public would pay, not he, and so what did it matter, even if it had been a hundred thousand?

"Very well," he said, with a well-simulated air of boredom. "I think we have spent time enough over this rather sordid business. You shall have your cheque and your note, if you will come with me into the library. I will go first, so that you can shoot me in the back if I play the fool, which I don't propose to do. I suppose I may get up now."

"Certainly," she replied, stepping aside, but still keeping the revolver in position. "I am glad that you have taken such a sensible view of the matter."

He got up and led the way to the library, she following him with ready hand and alert eyes. He sat down to the writing-table, took a cheque-book out of his pocket and drew the cheque, then he wrote the note, describing the consideration for which he had given it, then blotted them, put them into an envelope, and handed it to her without a word. She took it with her left hand, put it into the pocket of her packet, and gave him the other envelope, but all the time her right hand never moved. "Thank you," she said, "and now I will trouble you to show me to the street door."

He got up and led the way to the drawing-room again, and, as he was going to open the door of the landing, she said, stopping in the middle of the room:

"Oh, there's something else, Sir Vic-

tor, that I was almost forgetting. It does not matter how I got possession of that cheque, but I will tell you why. It was not with any intention of making it the basis of a business transaction. You have called me a liar and a blackmailer, and I have very good reason for believing that you are a secret, but determined enemy, of the country whose safety and prosperity are a religion to me.

"Now, for your punishment, I will tell you that if I chose I could have produced evidence to prove that Miss Leone Lonsdale visited your brother at his chambers in the afternoon of the day on which that cheque was signed, and forced him to forge it so that she might pay her milliner's bills and gambling debts under a threat to take the money from Ackermann, the financier, who was quite willing to give her ten times the amount."

"No, no, don't interrupt me, please. I've been here too long already. You may not know that this well-beloved brother of yours is desperately in love with the lady you may still hope to make your wife. At that time I did not intend that she should marry you, for the simple reason that I proposed to do so myself, and this would have been the means of convincing you that you could not marry the accomplice of a forger, even though that forger was your own brother. As for the genuineness of the cheque, you can easily verify that by reference to the counterfoils of your brother's cheque-book, which, possibly, he may allow you to make. Within the last few hours, however, I have found reason to alter my plans so completely that I have no hesitation in wishing Miss Lonsdale and yourself the greatest possible happiness that the circumstances will permit. And now, if you please, the door."

Again the elemental instinct of the human animal, the tigerish longing to spring at this beautiful, smiling enemy of peace and fling her strangled to the floor came over him, but the alert eyes were watching him, and he recognised that nothing but disaster and possibly, death could be the result of such madness.

"You have conquered this time," he said, with a forced calmness which for the moment masked the hell of hate and passion that was raging within him. "and, woman-like, you have pushed your victory to the last extreme. If you ever pray, go home now and pray as you have never prayed before than the position between us may never be reversed."

"Thanks," she said. "There was not much need for the warning, but I dare say you meant it well. Good-night."

He opened the door and went before her out on to the landing. He descended the stairs in front of her. Mr. Dawkins got up from his armchair.

"Would the lady like a cab, sir?"

"No, thank you," said Princess Zaida. "I have only a little way to go, and I would rather walk."

Then the door opened. She had slipped the revolver into her pocket and fastened her cloak as she was coming downstairs. She held out her hand and said very sweetly:

"Good-night and thank you, Sir Victor. I owe you a thousand apologies for such an extraordinary visit, but I hope the urgency will excuse it. Good-night again!"

Then she went out into the dark, quiet street and walked slowly in the direction of Hyde Park corner, her whole being glowing with triumph qualified only by her anxiety as to how Falcone was keeping that other appointment.

(To be Continued.)

The man who drives the royal mail,  
The maid who carries the milking pail,  
The stockman on the cattle run,  
The sportsman with his dog and gun,  
The watchman going his nightly round,  
The miner working under ground,  
All make themselves from COLLS SCIENCE  
By using WOODS' GREAT PEPPERMINT  
CURE.

**WEAK NERVOUS**  
AND DEPRESSED SYSTEMS—our concentrated extracts of HERB, ROOTS, BARKS and GLOSSONIES will restore you to good HEALTH, STRENGTH and true MANHOOD when all else has FAILED. Valuable advice explaining NATURE'S SIMPLE TREATMENT sent post free to the afflicted. Address—  
**BOTANICAL INSTITUTE,**  
Victoria Chambers, Elizabeth-st., SYDNEY.