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The Merry Widow

By ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

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CHAPTER I The Girl With the Millions.

THE widow just now is the queen of our diplomatic chess-board," sighed the Marsovian ambassador's pretty wife. "She will be her tonight. My husband is hanging over the banisters watching for her."

"But what reason?"

"Oh, he has exactly twenty million reasons for—"

"I don't understand," murmured M. de Joldon.

"No? Then you are probably the only bachelor in Paris who doesn't. She was the daughter of a poor Marsovian farmer—no dowry but her beauty. An enormously rich old banker named Sadova, wealthiest man in Marsovia, fell in love with her, married her and did her the exquisitely graceful favor of dying a week later. She inherited his whole fortune—\$20,000,000."

"And now I suppose she has come to Paris to spend it?"

"Oh, the money is safe enough for the present, I believe, in the Bank of—"



THE MERRY WIDOW.

Marsovia. But my husband wants it to stay there. So does the Marsovian government. Ours is not a rich country, M. de Joldon. That's why a new white hair appears in my worthy husband's head every time one of your Parisian lady killers makes love to her. It's all absurdly simple."

"Well," laughed De Joldon, "his hair needn't turn white on my account. I'll be the one Frenchman who won't make love to Mme. Sadova."

"But you must."

"What?"

"You must marry her, at any rate."

"Are you mad, Natalie, or is this—"

"It is no joke, and I'm not mad. I've thought it all out."

The ambassador's wife glanced nervously about her. She and De Joldon were ensconced in an alcove of the salon.

It was the night of the embassy ball. From the adjoining ballroom came the strains of a waltz and the soft gliding of hundreds of dancing feet. Guests were passing and re-passing along the great hallway and broad stairs at the rear of the salon. But for the moment the two had the room to themselves.

"Listen," she said. "My husband suspects nothing thus far, but he is certain to in time unless—"

"Unless I divert his thoughts by marrying some one else? I can't, and you know I can't for!"

"Hush! You mustn't say it. I am a dutiful wife. And—what are you doing?" she queried as he snatched up her fan from the table. With the peep that dangled from his dancing card De Joldon scribbled three words on one of the ivory sticks of the fan, then handed it to his hostess.

"Oh, you found him at last? That's better. Where?"

"At Maxim's, your—"

"Maxim's, eh?" snorted Ambassador Popoff scornfully. "Idling away his time, as usual, when—"

"Oh, no, your excellency, not exactly 'idling.' If I may say so. He seemed very busy. There were a number of bottles and—"

"Was he sober?"

"Not distressingly so, your excellency. In fact, if I may—"

"Did you give him my message? Did you tell him?"

"I gave it word for word, sir. I told him his country was calling for him and that your excellency desired his immediate presence at the embassy."

"Well, what was his answer?"

"He said, 'Give my country my regards and tell it to go to—'"

"Where?" snapped Popoff as Nish paused in embarrassment.

"I'd-rather not say, sir; no place I'm at all familiar with."

"Oh, the ingrate," wailed Popoff. "The ingrate! Here he has been employed at the embassy all these months, and I've winked at his loafing and his dissipation, and the very first minute I really need him he refuses to come."

"Oh, no, your excellency," pleaded Nish; "scarcely as bad as all that, if I may say so—not 'refused' exactly. He will come. At least he promised to."

"Ah, that lifts a load from my brain if he promised he'll come! Diplomatically speaking, Prince Danilo's word is as good as his bond."

"Diplomatically speaking, your excellency," affirmed Nish, "he agrees to be here as soon as he has finished the magnum of champagne that was in the ice pail beside him when I left."

"How much of it was gone?"

"The cork was not yet drawn, but—"

"Be on the lookout for him, Mr. Nish. When he comes put ice on his head if necessary. Sober him at any cost."

"I fancy it will be cheaper than filling him up. I'll do my best, your excellency."

But the ambassador at a whispered word from a servant had already potted out of the room as fast as his somewhat shaky old legs would carry him, and the voluble Nish ran along in his wake.

A commotion swept through the scattered groups in the foyer—a murmur, a rustle, a whisper that resolved itself at last into the excited phrases: "The widow has arrived!" "Twenty millions and unincumbered!" "Widow of Sadova, the animated money bag!" "A Monte Cristo fortune for some lucky man!" "Her name is Sonia Sadova; twenty millions—red hair, too, but a beauty!" "Twenty millions!" "The Merry Widow!"

Down the stairway from the dressing rooms and into the salon swept a woman—young, beautiful, vivacious. A light of mischief danced in her great dark eyes.

Her masses of auburn hair shone like a fire, circled above her rather pale, delicate face. About her bowered a half score of gallants, all vying for a word, a look, from the beauty (and fortune) of the Paris season.

Two men—the Marquis of Casca and the Count de St. Brioché—were lucky enough to claim for a moment or two her attention.

"No, no," Sonia was saying in protest. "At home, in Marsovia, men don't make such pretty speeches. Courtship there is very primitive and marriage is for life. When a man makes love to another's wife, he is promptly shot. When a wife flirts, her husband beats her black and blue—a good plan. Why not try it in Paris?"

"Delightful!" exclaimed Casca. "Do you know, madame, we have been counting the moments until you appeared."

"I can well believe it," assented Sonia. "It must have been just like counting money."

"Oh, madame!" protested the group, horrified.

"Don't I know?" retorted Sonia, a little bitterly. "It's always like that. People count me like so much money. If it is coarse for me to say so, remember I'm a farmer's daughter and that in my country people call a spade a spade."

Popoff and Natalie came hurriedly in to pay their respects to the guest upon whom Marsovia's hopes so depended. At a sign from the ambassador the others drew back.

"So you were shocking some of our Paris gallants?" beamed the ambassador. "What a child of nature you are!"

"You mean," countered Sonia, "that I am a peasant dressed up. How I wish sometimes that I were a real peasant again!"

"Ah!" chuckled Popoff. "Child of nature, true, child of nature, always remembering the dear old days on the farm—the beating of the pig, the new laid milk, the tomatoes freshly dug up and all the simple joys of the country! But I want you to meet tonight some of our Marsovian nobility—for instance, Prince Danilo, a charming young fellow. He'll be here presently, Danilo is."

But the mischief had died out of Sonia's eyes. Her face was paler than was its wont, and there was a stern look as of pain about the daintily chiseled mouth.

"I have already met Prince Danilo," she said curtly.

"Really?" cried Popoff. Then, noting her change of expression, he added with apprehension:

"I hope it was not on one of his wet days—a charming, lovable youngster in spite of his—"

"I am not interested in hearing about him," broke in Sonia in a curiously level, emotionless voice. "It was long ago that we met. He will have forgotten me even as—as I have forgotten him. Let us talk of something else, please."

Even Popoff could see something was seriously amiss.

CHAPTER II Old Love and New.

"WELL, here I am," announced a tall, slender youth, entering the deserted salon a few minutes later with Nish at his side. "I'm here at my country's call, all right, but my confounded country doesn't seem to be on hand to meet me."

His graceful walk was not wholly steady, and there was a flush on the handsome young face. The late arrival was Prince Danilo of Marsovia, attache of the Marsovian legation at Paris. As a diplomat he had scarcely scored a success, for he had a delightfully normal aversion to work and a simple, unflattering joy in the amusements of Maxim's and his clubs.

"I'll hunt up his excellency at once," Nish was assuring the prince. "Are you quite in condition to see him, if I may?"

"Oh, I'm all right enough," yawned Danilo. "Only I forgot to go to bed last night. If I could reef off a few yards of sleep—"

"Perhaps I could find you some place to—"

"I'd prefer a desk, if you can find one. I always sleep best at my desk. But I suppose—"

"There is a couch, sir, over in the corner behind the palms. How would that do? You could get a nice nap there, and in a little while I'd find his excellency for you. But, sir, if I may say so, why do you waste your life in dissipation when you might marry and settle down? Just think, now! Would not a dear little wife and a home of your own be better worth, while than all your clubs?—I leave it to you!"

"You leave it to me?" retorted Danilo. "Then I make it clubs."

"But, if I may say so—"

"You may not," interrupted Danilo, crossing to the couch and throwing himself at full length among his cushions. "By by! If you're waking, call me early!"

He spread a handkerchief over his face and in a moment was sound asleep, leaving Nish to tiptoe out in search of Popoff.

For a few minutes no sound was audible in the empty salon save the distant swell and fall of dance music, punctuated by the stumorous prince's heavy breathing.

Then Natalie hurried in with De Joldon. Both looked anxious.

"How careless of me!" the ambassador's wife was exclaiming. "Where can I have dropped the miserable fan? If my husband should pick it up and find on it those words you were foolish enough to write— I wonder if I left it in the niche on the stairs when we were sitting there. Let's go back and see."

They turned back, almost colliding with Sonia, who was entering, Casca's delicate hand held her.

"Oh, Mme. Sadova," asked Natalie, "you haven't seen anything of a white ivory fan? I've looked everywhere, and—"

"No," replied the widow, "but I'll look in this room if you haven't made a thorough search here already."

Natalie, thanking her, hurried back with her cavalier to the stairway. Sonia idly began her search, but Casca interrupted her.

"That can wait," he pleaded, "but I cannot. Won't you hear me?"

"Certainly," assented Sonia cheerfully. "You are going to propose, aren't you?"

"Ah, you read my secret?"

"It required little cleverness. You men are all alike."

"But no man ever before loved an I love!" protested Casca, his voice unconsciously rising in his emotion. "You are all the world to me. Until I met you I never thought I could—"

"Ring off!" grumbled Danilo in his sleep, vaguely bothered by the loud voice.

Sonia started.

"Some one is here!" she whispered, pointing toward the hidden couch.

"You are mistaken," contradicted Casca, "and even if it were so I am willing for all the world to know how I—"

them are after my money and make love to me because they can't get it without me."

"Men are not all fortune hunters," he denied hotly. "I for one—"

"So they all say. Each means 'I love you!' Each means my fortune."

"They do?" cried Danilo, in rage at the strong insinuation. "Well, here's one that doesn't. I for one shall never say to you, 'I love you!'"

A strange smile stole across her face. She came very close to where he stood; so close that the faint perfume of her hair was sweet in his nostrils; so close that her breath was warm upon his lips; so close that his bewildered soul struggled in vain to hide from the glory in her eyes. Her voice was a musical whisper as she asked:

{To be Continued.}

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