The Merry Widow

By ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

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CHAPTER IV.

The Waltz.

"DANCE with me!" repeated Sonia.

The faroff orchestra had struck up a dashing, gay Marsovian air. Impelled by the music and her glance of daring, Danilo sprang forward.

In an instant the two were whirling madly amid the intricacies of a wild Russian dance such as has for countless centuries been performed from Siberia's ice plain to Tartar steppes—a dance of youth, agility, utter abandon.

Yet as they came panting to a halt at the last crashing note of music the face of neither reflected the exhilaration the swift motion and stirring measures usually evoked. In fact, Danilo's brow wore a very perceptible scowl. Sonia, too, was downcast. Had her rash experiment failed?

"You didn't enjoy that," said she.

"Not especially," he confessed. "Did you?"

"No. You don't dance as well as you did."

"You've probably grown to prefer French partners," he replied, piqued at the reflection on his dancing.

"From all I hear," she retorted, "you have little right to reproach me on that score. You dance a good deal at Maxim's, don't you?"

"Now and then," he admitted.

"And with what sort of partners, I wonder?" she scoffed, a touch of scorn in her sweet voice.

"With polite ones," said Danilo icily.

She winced ever so little at the reproof and went on.

"I suppose you dance better with them than with me."

"Possibly," he agreed. "You see, I, too, may prefer French partners."

She raised her great dark eyes to his, a world of meaning in them.

"Do you?" she asked, almost in a whisper.

The distant orchestra had been playing again, this time not a native air, but a dreamy, infinitely sweet Viennese waltz. The opening notes of the haunting melody, though softened by distance, were wafted none the less distinctly to the listening couple.

Again their eyes met. With a mutual impulse they drew toward each other. Then began a dance as different from the stiffly conventional ballroom waltz as moonlight differs from a gasoline flare. With more than a hint of the free, marvelously graceful poses of Slavonic dancers, Danilo and Sonia began their wondrous waltz.

Throwing herself back into the strength of his circling embrace, the girl's outstretched arms swayed like wind blown lilies in rhythm with the music, her light step scarcely touching earth as the prince guided her through the mazes of the dance.

It was a strange, dexterous blend of east and west, of lissom oriental posturing and of gliding, modern waltz steps—the very poetry of motion. Nor from the first note until the last strain of music died away did either dancer's eyes leave the other's.

Love, eager and eternal, was in the gaze of each. Eye said openly to eye what sullen pride forced back from the lips.

Then a last dreamy chord and the music was hushed. Danilo and Sonia started, amazed, as though from some vision of paradise. The widow, fearful lest by impulsive word she might wreck her plan of bringing Danilo to her feet, darted breathlessly away to welcome a new group of guests. The prince, left alone, stared after her, open mouthed. A clapping of applauding hands aroused him.

"Bravo, bravo, my dear prince!" wheezed the ambassador, toddling forward. "What a delightful little dance! But is it customary to catch one's partner in a jiu jitsu grip like that, or is it a fashion that has come in since my waltzing days?"

The old bore's feeble jest brought Danilo quickly back to earth and to a sense of everyday surroundings.

"Were you looking for me?" he asked, none too civilly.

"Only to see if you had succeeded yet in finding who the lady is with whom De Jolidon is in love. She must be made to win him away from any ideas of marrying the widow."

"To blazes with that and all the rest of your silly plans!" shouted Danilo. "Don't worry any more about the widow. It's no use, I tell you. She is going to marry a Frenchman in spite of us all! And," he went on bitterly, goaded by the chagrin and abject disappointment in Popoff's face, "I'm going to dance at her wedding."

"Going to marry a Frenchman, is she?" yelled the distracted ambassador. "Preposterous! I'll find a way of stopping it! And it is De Jolidon she thinks of marrying?"

"What's that to me? I don't know who she's engaged to, and"—

But Popoff waited to hear no more. Catching sight of Nish, he rushed upon that unhappy clerk.

"Find M. de Jolidon!" he commanded. "Keep your eye on him all the rest of the evening. See if he makes love to the widow and report to me. I have already told Mme. Popoff to sound him on the subject. Among us all we ought to learn something before we're done."

"You'll learn 'something' if you keep on spying," muttered Danilo under his breath as he moved away. "But I'll bet a year's income it'll be something that will give you more surprise than pleasure."

Dusk was falling. Above the myriad colored lights that dotted the garden the moon was rising. Along one of the hedged paths leading to the summer house a man and a woman were strolling—Mme. Natalie Popoff and M. de Jolidon.

"And so your worthy husband set you the task of finding out whom I am in love with?" De Jolidon was saying.

"Yes," the ambassador's young wife answered. "He is afraid you will marry the widow."

"Why shouldn't I?" queried De Jolidon jokingly. "You told me to."

"But—but you won't, will you?" she pleaded. "Why don't you look at me? What are you looking at?"

De Jolidon's eye had fallen on the fan where it lay forgotten on the table.

"The fan you lost and that your husband pocketed," he said, handing it to her.

"Thank goodness!" Natalie exclaimed, seizing it; then:

"Lend me a pencil."

She wrote a sentence on the fan directly beneath the three words he had scribbled the night before at the ball.

"There," she sighed, handing it to him; "keep that as a reminder."

He held the fan up to the light and read:

"I—am—a—dutiful—wife."

"Remember that always," she adjured.

"Natalie!" he cried passionately.

"It is true—I am a dutiful wife. If I have been foolish enough to listen to your lovemaking, at least I have never encouraged it. I have always rebuffed you for conscience's sake. I am a dutiful"—

"Why remind me of the hopelessness of my love?" murmured De Jolidon. "You may refuse to reciprocate it, but you cannot prevent my telling you"—

"But I can. After this evening we must not meet again. My husband trusts me. This must be our farewell interview. Don't try to alter my purpose. I have made up my mind. After this evening I shall never"—

"Natalie, you can't mean"—

"I do. This is the last talk we two shall ever have together."

"Then," implored De Jolidon, "if it is really to be our farewell interview, why must we talk here in the garden, where at any moment others may come to claim your attention? Grant me a final half hour of your society all to myself. Let the talk be uninterrupted. Let us sit in the little summer house over there. See—it is empty."

They entered the little inclosed arbor. It was lighted by a string of Japanese lanterns, and two rustic chairs were at opposite sides of its round center table. There was a door at each end of the tiny room—an ideal spot for a tete-a-tete chat now that the moonlight had wooed most of the guests out of doors.

The light wicker door swung shut behind the couple. Natalie quite enjoyed the prospect of listening to her adorer's melodramatic words of farewell and of posing heroically as a self sacrificing, dutiful wife. In half an hour at most she would rejoin her husband with the righteous consciousness in her heart of having dismissed forever the one man besides Popoff who had ever made love to her.

So interested was Natalie in De Jolidon's parting speech that she did not hear the ambassador, just outside, declare excitedly:

"Nish, I'm sure I saw that summer house door close behind a lady's skirt! Let's see who is in there!"

(To be continued.)

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THE MERRY WIDOW

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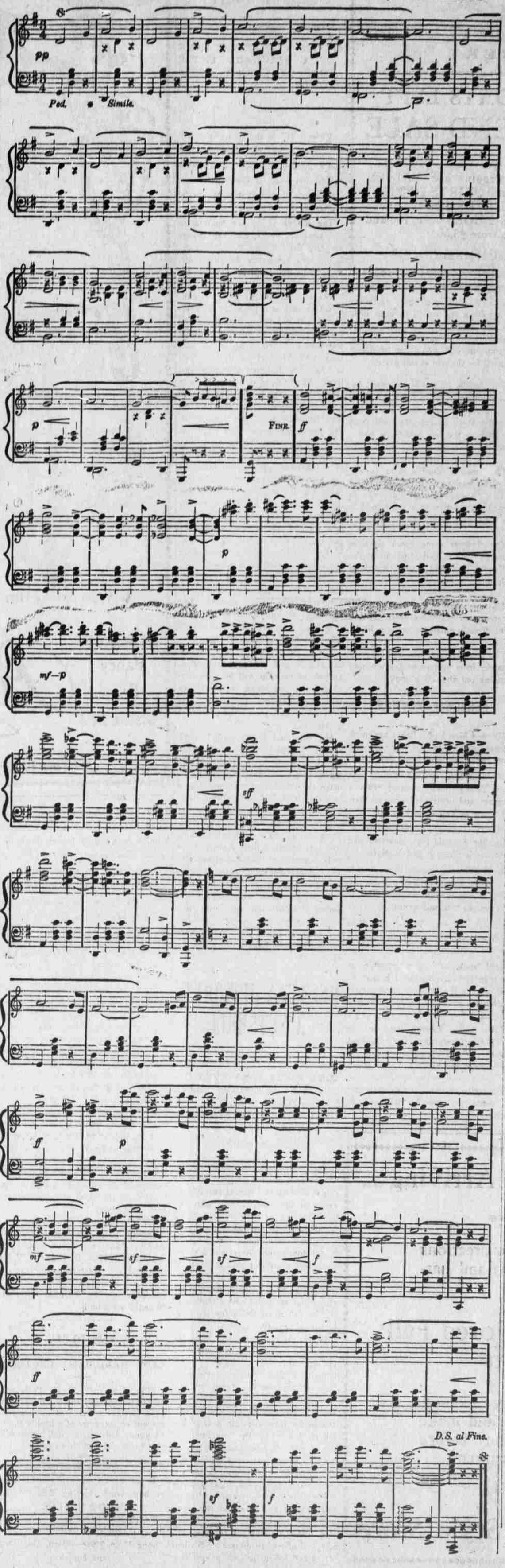

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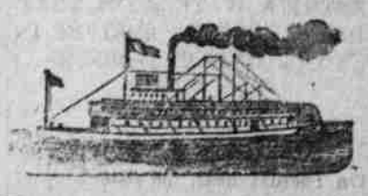

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