

# Why Fashionable Society is Curious About Robert Goelet's Italian Bride

Pretty Fernanda Riabouchinsky, Divorced and Glad of a \$40-a-Week Job, Suddenly Has a Turn of Luck, Meets Goelet and Finally Becomes the Multi-Millionaire's Bride



**T**HE marriage of Robert Goelet, once called "the world's richest bachelor," to the strange, fascinating Madame Fernanda Rocchi Riabouchinsky, sometimes called "Princess Riabouchinsky," is the most astonishing social occurrence of the day. Although the event occurred in Paris on October 22 it is discussed as much as ever, for the couple have yet to appear in society in this country—and never did a bride face so many curious questions which fashionable society would like to know the answer to.

Was she a "Princess" or was she not? She permitted herself to be called "Princess" and then suddenly refused to allow people to call her by this title.

Was she crazy for a dramatic "career" or was she not? She signed a stage contract with great enthusiasm and then she said she couldn't possibly think of going on the stage.

Was she seeking a chance to exploit herself in the newspapers or was she not? She arranged for a series of articles and gladly posed for a bunch of photographs generously revealing her charming face and figure, and then insisted that she really couldn't consent to having the articles published.

She signed a contract to work for \$40 a week—and suddenly asked to be released from it. What was the sudden turn of the wheel of fortune that changed all her plans?

Fashionable society awaits the arrival of Mr. Goelet's interesting bride and would like to know the answer to these puzzling questions.

In the first place it must be remembered who Robert Goelet is. He comes from one of the oldest of Knickerbocker families and owns the largest block of New York real estate after the Astors. Much of the Goelet property is on Fifth avenue and Madison avenue near Fifth street. His wealth has been reckoned at \$100,000,000. His relatives on this side include the Gerrys and Vanderbilts and many others of similar importance, and his sister is the Duchess of Roxburghe in England.

On the other hand Madame Rocchi Riabouchinsky is the daughter of a poor professor and never had any fashionable social position.

She came here from Russia with a husband whose name was certainly a mouthful to pronounce and who wore luxuriant whiskers and who planned to hold a sale of "antiquities." Then she obtained a divorce from that husband.

And then began a succession of episodes in the new Mrs. Goelet's career that fill society with wondering curiosity, some of which have been already mentioned.

It was late in 1915 that Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas Riabouchinsky first approached American shores by way of the Pacific. He was quoted as saying that he brought several millions with him to purchase munitions for Russia.

The Russian couple established their New York headquarters in a handsome

suite of rooms in the Hotel Knickerbocker, a resort for the lively element of society. They had with them a large collection of art objects which were described in a catalogue as being paintings by such noted Old Masters as Lippo Lippi, Luini, Hans Memling and Cranach, not to mention Van Dyck and a few others. There were also porcelains by the greatest Renaissance masters of France, and antique bronzes from Italy.

Riabouchinsky valued this collection at a mere \$1,000,000 and said he proposed to devote the proceeds also to buying munitions for Russia. He professed himself unable to speak English, and his beautiful Italian wife acted as interpreter. Concerning her origin we have definite information, for Robert Goelet's office has issued a statement, saying:

"Mrs. Riabouchinsky is twenty-four years old and is the daughter of Professor and Mrs. Mariano Rocchi, of Perugia, Italy, where Professor Rocchi holds the chair of Painting and Design at the University of Perugia."

When Madame Riabouchinsky was living with her first husband Bohemian society loved to call her "Princess," but she has since given it to be understood that she had no claim to the title. Her husband is said to have been a member of the Russian diplomatic service, an official of the Bank of Moscow and a writer on art, dancing and other matters under the Czar's regime—rather an astonishing and surprising collection of accomplishments.

At the Hotel Knickerbocker stage the lovely Madame or "Princess" Riabouchinsky was pathetically desirous to have a "career," to be known as an actress or an exponent of physical culture or a writer on topics associated with those callings.

She met the New York theatrical manager, Morris Gest, and eagerly accepted from him an offer to display her beauty in various roles for the modest salary of \$40 a week. It is interesting to remember that she now enjoys the revenue from about \$100,000,000 of New York real estate.

"The Prince and Princess were stopping at the Knickerbocker Hotel," said Mr. Gest. "She saw one of my productions, was impressed with it and sought me out. She told me that she desired a career, that she was not satisfied with her life as it was, and wanted my judgment upon her abilities. The moment I looked upon her I knew that here was a find such as one

makes only in a generation. She had beauty and grace, but besides those she had also that indefinable thing which we call magnetism. Furthermore, she was extremely intelligent and temperamental. I recognized at once that with proper training here was a woman who might become a second Bernhardt, another Duse, and she was most beautiful!

"We entered into a contract, she accepting the terms most willingly. The first year she was to receive \$40 a week—so little because that year would necessarily be spent largely in her training. The second year she was to receive \$200 a week, and the third year \$500 a week. And then she sent a lawyer around to ask me to release her from the contract!

"Already at that time I had acquired the rights of the great scenic production, 'Aphrodite.' I had intended to really make her debut as Chrysis, the priestess of

Aphrodite, the Alexandrian courtesan, who is the heroine of this great play. In the meantime I had cast her for Beauty in the play 'Experience,' and intended, after she had found herself a little more, to rehearse her as Passion in that same play."

At about the same time Madame Riabouchinsky undertook to write for a newspaper a series of articles describing how she had cultivated her remarkable beauty and giving valuable advice to women who were desirous of attaining similar perfection.

Just after these occurrences, in June, 1916, a deeply significant event took place. Madame Riabouchinsky sued her husband, commonly known as "Prince," for divorce in the New York Supreme Court. She alleged that "an unknown woman" had alienated her husband's affections. Just before this Riabouchinsky had been sued in a Federal court for \$45,000 which he refused to pay on the ground that it was a gambling debt. Madame Riabouchinsky said it was through this case that she learned of her husband's infatuation for the other woman. Madame Riabouchinsky obtained her divorce.

At this time, or perhaps, a little earlier, the lovely Italian woman had made the acquaintance of the multi-millionaire, Robert Goelet. Accounts generally agree that they first came together through their mu-

tual interest in Red Cross work, in which Mr. Goelet was very active, even before the United States entered the war.

It is not venturing much to say that the multi-millionaire was deeply impressed with her from the first. She had the figure of a delicious young wood nymph and dressed in exquisite taste, but in a very picturesque, unusual and highly artistic style. The combination of rich Italian beauty with a highly cultivated sense of the charm of drapery and just a touch of Russian mystery and strangeness was one which might have stolen the senses of any man. The social prejudices which Mr. Goelet has defied in order to marry her prove the force of the charm which he experienced.

Before beginning her divorce suit Madame Riabouchinsky moved from the lively Hotel Knickerbocker to a very dignified, artistic and charming apartment at No. 449 Park avenue.

Then a complete and most surprising change occurred in Madame, sometimes called "Princess," Riabouchinsky's views of life. She felt no longer the least desire to have "a career," to become a great actress, to be a gifted writer for the press on elevating themes, or to teach other women to develop the priceless gift of beauty.

The newspaper had already gratified her early ambition by beginning the publication of her articles on beauty culture. Suddenly a lawyer engaged by Madame Riabouchinsky obtained an injunction against

that newspaper, forbidding the continuation of the series. The lawyer stated most particularly that Madame Riabouchinsky did not want to be called "Princess," to be represented as an actress or would-be actress, or public performer of any kind, or to be spoken of as an expert on beauty and beauty culture.

At nearly the same time she haughtily served notice on the pained and astonished Mr. Gest that she would not appear as Beauty or Passion, or even as Aphrodite herself, for the munificent sum of \$40 a week or for any other sum.

"Everything seemed splendid," said Mr. Gest, commenting on this episode. "She was happy in the career opening to her and I was happy in having found such a woman. I say again that her qualifications for the stage were such as are found only once in a generation.

"Judge, then, of my amazement, my complete astonishment, when one day an attorney called upon me, saying that it had all been a great mistake, that the Princess had changed her mind and wished to be released of her contract. Quite naturally I asked why. The only answer was that she had changed her mind. Only a few hours before this, practically, I had listened to Madame's enthusiasms. I asked for an interview with her to ascertain just what had occurred. My request was refused, and as a gentleman, of course, there was nothing else for me to do but release her from her contract."

Reports that Robert Goelet was about to marry Madame Riabouchinsky became current. Society had observed his rapt devotion to her for some time. His attendance upon her suffered a considerable interruption at one time, for when war broke out he went to an officers' training camp, subsequently obtained a commission.

Upon his return to this country his devotion to the lovely Madame Riabouchinsky became obvious to all those who follow the doings of the inner set of New York society.

In the Summer the curious noticed that Mr. Goelet's great house at Newport was being repaired. It had been neglected and more or less unoccupied since his first wife, once noted as the beautiful Elsie Whelen, obtained a divorce from him in 1914.

In August Mr. Goelet sailed for France. When asked plainly if he was going to marry Madame Riabouchinsky, he smiled happily and said it would be best to inquire of her. She had already preceded him on the road to Paris. In due course came an announcement that on October 22 they had been married at the American Church in Paris.

The official announcement from Mr. Goelet's office made it clear that the couple after a few weeks' honeymoon intended to "reside permanently in New York."

Society awaits with keen interest and curiosity the arrival of this new and unusual young woman who is such a mystery and such a contradiction.

They do not, of course, have to live in New York. Mr. Goelet has a beautiful estate in France, noted for its game preserves, and if that did not suit them they could live in any country that pleased them.

The command of the Goelet millions must be a delightful sensation to the poor professor's daughter and more than console her for the sacrifice of her "career" and the opportunity to appear as Beauty and Passion in "Experience."

Unusual and Intimate Photographs of Mme. Riabouchinsky Who Is Now in the Centre of Fashionable New York Society.