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# The Merry Widow

By **ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE**

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## CHAPTER I.

### The Girl With the Millions.

**T**HE widow just now is the queen of our diplomatic chess-board," sighed the Marsovian ambassador's pretty wife. "She will be here 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 Joldou.

"No? Then you are probably the only bachelor in Paris who doesn't. She was the daughter of a poor Marsovian farmer—no dandy 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

"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 pencil that dangled from his dancing end De Joldou scribbled three words on one of the ivory sticks of the fan, then handed it to his hostess.

Natalie, with a little catch in her breath, slowly read the words aloud: "I—love—you!"

"Why did you write this?" she asked.

"Because you forbade me to say it," he retorted.

"Tell his excellency I have come back," broke in a voice at the door.

As a servant hurried off with the message the speaker waddled into the room. He was a stout, ungainly little man, clad in the quaint national costume of Marsovia. Bald of head, popping of eye and with abnormally long red mustache, his was a personality to excite laughter in a mummy.

The newcomer was Nish, messenger and clerk of the embassy. At his approach Natalie and De Joldou slipped away to the ballroom. A moment later a tall, lean, fussy man with hooked nose and mining gait trotted down the stairway and into the salon.

"Well, Mr. Nish," he asked peevishly, "did you find Prince Danilo at home?"

"No, your excellency," faltered the little man. "He—"

"Did you go thence, as I told you, to the American bar at—"

and I've winked at his losing 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 pattered 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 an aureole above her rather pale, delicate face. About her hovered 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 de Cascada and the Count de St. Bricole—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 sists, her husband beats her black and blue—a good plan. Why not try it in Paris?"

"Delightful!" exclaimed Cascada. "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 bleating of the pigs, 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.



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 Joldou. 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 Joldou, "his hair needn't turn whiter 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 Joldou 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 in time unless—"

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

"Yes, sir. But he was not at home there tonight."

"Odd. He's usually very much at home there, I'm told. So you failed in your mission? You couldn't find him?"

"Oh, yes, your excellency. I found him—that is to say, I—"

"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,

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