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The Merry Widow

By ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

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"Then," squealed Popoff in triumph, "it is Mme. Nova Kovitch he loves. The whole thing is absurdly simple when a train like mine is brought to war on it!"

Delighted with his own astuteness, the ambassador pattered off to join the other guests, leaving Danilo, fan in hand, blankly facing the astounded little clerk.

"Nish," observed the prince, "do you suppose it's possible the Jolidon can be in love with Mme. Nova Kovitch as well as with Mme. Popoff?"

"I'd-I'd like to think so," murmured Nish as he started faithfully off in the wake of his chief. "I'd like to think so. It-it would make it less exclusive, less of a monopoly. And to think his excellency never recognized his own wife's fan! Where ignorance is bliss why read up on divorce laws?"

Laying the fan on a nearby table, Danilo was turning away when a voice behind him called mockingly.

"Still in retreat? So you are afraid of me?"

Whirling about, the prince faced Sonia. She was bewitchingly pretty in the black and gold Marsovian dress that snowed to fullest advantage every wily line of her figure.

"I'm not retreating," he contradicted, "only skirmishing in light cavalry fashion."

"And you are going away like that? Oh, you stupid man!"

jealous? That's a good one?"

Words failed him, and he stalked away to a nearby summer house, where he paused, lost in seeming contemplation of the little building's architecture.

The neglected fan lying on the table caught Danilo's eye. She picked it up dilly and opened it. The words "I love you" met her gaze. Quickly she glanced at Danilo.

"I understand," she murmured to herself. "He vowed he'd never say it to me, so he's written it."

Noting that Danilo's back was toward her, she furtively lifted the fan to her lips and kissed the written words. Then as she restored it to the table she whispered:

"Just the same, I'll make him say it. He shall!"

She crossed to where he stood.

"Have you nothing to say to me, prince?" she asked.

"Only one thing—goodby!"

"Goodby?" she echoed. "You're—you're not going?"

"I leave Paris tomorrow morning—by the first train—forever!"

"Then you won't be here, after all, to dance at my wedding?"

"No!"

"But you promised. And now, I suppose, I shall never see you again, for when I'm married I shall live in Paris."

"I thought you were more patriotic," he sighed. "It seems hard that you



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?"



ALL HER MARSOVIAN GUESTS WORE THEIR PICTURESQUE NATIVE COSTUMES.

"I can't tell what you mean," he answered, puzzled.

"And I shan't tell what I mean," she rejoined. "By the way," she added, "how do you happen to be here? You declined my invitation."

"I'm here," he replied bluntly, "because I'm making it my business to get rid of every Frenchman who shows signs of proposing to you."

"But why?" she asked in wonder.

"For my own amusement; that's all."

"You—you don't happen to be in love with me yourself?" she asked, a tinge of wistfulness in the light mockery of her tone.

"Certainly not!" he retorted, with suspicious promptitude.

"You're very, very rude!" she reproved. "But since you don't love me you ought to be able to give me good advice about accepting a man I really want to marry."

"Oh!" growled Danilo, chagrined. "Then there is some one you want to marry?"

She nodded.

"Whoever the man is, he's after your money," he sneered.

"No," she contradicted. "He is not—this one."

"You said all men were alike."

"This man is different. He loves me."

"Then marry him! What is it to me? Marry any one you want to. I don't care. And I'll dance at your wedding. I'll dance till I wear holes through both my shoes."

"You silly boy!" she scoffed. "You're jealous!"

"Jealous?" he raged. "Jealous? I

should turn your back on your native land, marry a Frenchman and settle here."

"Yet it is what I have decided," she answered. "This is probably the last time I shall wear our native costume or dance our wild national dances. Today's fete is a sort of farewell to old times."

"No; our dances and costumes would not appeal to a Frenchman. Who is it you are going to marry?"

"The engagement isn't announced yet," she evaded.

"Then," he returned, with a shrug, "I suppose I shall never know, for I leave early tomorrow."

"And you won't dance at my wedding?"

"I've told you I would not."

"If you won't," she cried, a sudden inspiration flashing through her mind and lighting her pale face to dazzling beauty, "dance with me now!"

She stretched out her slender white arms with an allurements that no mortal man could resist.



"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 lolly.

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.



To Be Continued

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