

THE WAGER OF THE MARQUIS DE MEROSILLES. BY ANTHONY HOPE "The Prisoner of Zenda" "The Dolly Dialogues" Etc.

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In the year 1624, as spring came, there arrived at Stralsund a French nobleman of high rank and great possessions and endowed with many accomplishments. He came to visit Prince Rudolf, whose acquaintance he had made while the prince was at Paris in the course of his travels. King Henry received M. de Merosilles for such was his name, most graciously and sent a guard of honor to conduct him to the castle of Zenda where the prince was then staying in company with his sister Osa. There the marquis on his arrival was greeted with much joy by Prince Rudolf, who found in him a friend in the country somewhat irksome and was glad of the society of a friend with whom he could talk and sport and play at cards. All these things he did with M. de Merosilles, and a great friendship arose between the young men, so that they spoke very freely to one another at all times, and most of all when they had drunk their wine and sat together in the evening in Prince Rudolf's chamber that looked across the moat to the gardens, for the new chateau that now stands on the site of these gardens was not then built. And one night M. de Merosilles made bold to ask the prince how it fell out that his sister the princess, a lady of such great beauty, seemed and showed so much pleasure in the society of any gentleman, but treated all alike with coldness and disdain. Prince Rudolf, laughing, answered that girls were strange creatures and that he had ceased to trouble his head about them—of her he said, nothing, and he finished by exclaiming, "On my honor, I doubt if she so much as knows you are here, for she has not looked at you once since your arrival." And he smiled maliciously, for he knew that the marquis was not accustomed to be rebuffed in this way and would take it ill that even a princess should be inattentive of his presence. In this he calculated rightly, for M. de Merosilles was greatly vexed, and, twisting his glass in his fingers, he said:

"If she were not a princess and your sister, sir, I would engage to make her look at me."

"I am not hurt by her looking at you," rejoined the prince, for that evening he was very merry. "A look is no great thing."

And the marquis, being also very merry and knowing that Rudolf had less regard for his dignity than a prince should have, threw out carelessly:

"A kiss is more, sir."

"It is a great deal more," laughed the prince, tugging his mustache.

"Are you ready for a wager, sir?" asked M. de Merosilles, leaning across the table toward him.

"I'll lay you 1,000 crowns to 100 that you do not gain a kiss, using what means you will save force."

"I'll take the wager, sir," cried the marquis, "but it shall be three, not one!"

"Have a care," said the prince. "Don't go too near the flame, my lord! There are some wings in Stralsund singed at that cauldron."

"Indeed the light is very bright," assented the marquis courteously. "That risk I must run, though, if I am to win my wager. It is to be three, then, and by what means I will save force."

"Even so," said Rudolf, and he laughed again, for he thought the wager harmless, since by no means could M. de Merosilles win so much as one kiss from the princess Osa, and the wager stood at three. But he did not think how he wronged his sister by using her name lightly, being in all such matters a man of careless mind.

But the marquis, having made his wager, set himself steadily to win it, for he brought forth the choicest clothes from his wardrobe, his ornaments and perfumes, and he laid fine presents at the princess's feet, and he waylaid her wherever she went and was profuse of glances, sighs and hints, and he wrote sonnets as fine gentlemen used to do in those days, and lyrics and pastorals, wherein she figured under charming names. These he bribed the princess's waiting women to leave in their mistress's chamber. Moreover, he looked now sorrowful, now passionate, and he ate nothing at dinner, but drank his wine in wild gulp as though he sought to banish sadness.

So that, in a word, there was no device in Cupid's armory that the Marquis de Merosilles did not practice in the endeavor to win a kiss from the Princess Osa. But no kiss came and he got nothing from her but cold civility. Yet she had looked at him when he looked not—for princesses are much like other maidens—and thought him a very pretty gentleman and was highly amused by his extravagance, yet she did not believe it to witness any true devotion to her, but thought it mere gallantry.

Then one day M. de Merosilles, having tried all else that he could think of, took to his bed. He sent for a physician and paid him a high fee to find the seeds of a rapid and fatal disease in him, and he made his body servant whiten his face and darken the room, and he groaned very pitifully, saying that he was sick and that he was glad if, for death would be better far than the continued disdain of the Princess Osa. And all this, being told by the marquis's servants to the princess's waiting women, reached Osa's ears and caused her much perturbation, for she now perceived that the passion of the marquis was real and deep, and she became very sorry for him, and the longer the face of the rashly physician grew the more sad the princess became, and she walked up and down, bewailing the terrible effects of her beauty, wishing that she were not so fair and mourning very tenderly for the sad plight of the unhappy marquis. Through all Prince Rudolf looked on, but was bound by his wager not to undo her. Moreover, he found much entertainment in the matter and swore that it was worth these times 1,000 crowns.

At last the marquis went, by the mouth of the physician, a very humble and pitiful message to the princess, in which he spoke of himself as near to death, hinted at the cruel cause of his condition and prayed her, of her compassion to visit him in his chamber and speak a word of comfort, or at least let him look on her face, for the brightness of her eyes, he said, might cure even what it had caused.

Deceived by this appeal, Princess Osa agreed to go. Moved by some strange impulse, she put on her loveliest gown, dressed her hair most splendidly and came into his chamber looking like a goddess. There lay the marquis, white as a ghost and languid, on his pillows,

and, summoning his servant, bade him saddle his horse. "For," said he to himself, "I will ride into the forest and there kill myself, and perhaps when I am dead the princess will forgive me and will believe in my love and grieve a little for me."

Now, as he went from his chamber to cross the moat by the drawbridge he encountered Prince Rudolf returning from hunting. They met full in the center of the bridge, and the prince, seeing M. de Merosilles dressed all in black from the feather in his cap to his boots, called out, mockingly: "Who is to be buried today, my lord, and will you ride to the funeral? It cannot be yourself, for I see that you are marvelously recovered of your sickness."

"But it is myself," answered the marquis, coming near and speaking low that the servants and the falconers might not overhear. "And I ride straight to my own funeral."

"The jest is still about them?" asked the prince. "Yet I do not see my sister at the window to watch you go, and I warrant you have made no way with your wager yet."

"A thousand curses on my wager!" cried the marquis. "Yes, I have made way with the accursed thing, and that is why I now go to my death."

"What has she kissed you?" cried the prince, with a merry, astonished laugh.

"Yes, sir, she has kissed me once, and therefore I go to die."

"I have heard many a better reason than that," answered the prince. "By now the prince had dismounted, and he stood by M. de Merosilles in the middle of the bridge and looked from him how the trick had prospered. At this he was much tickled, and, alas, he was even more diverted when the point of the marquis was revealed to him and was most of all moved to merriment when it appeared that the marquis, having gone too near the candle, had been caught by its flame and was so terribly singed and scorched that he could not bear to live. And while they talked on the bridge the prince looked out on them from a lofty, narrow window, but neither of them saw her. Now, when the prince had done laughing, he put his arm through his friend's and bade him not to be a fool, but come in and toast the princess's kiss in a draft of wine. "For," he said, "though you will never get the same kiss again, yet it is a brave exploit to have got one."

But the marquis shook his head, and his air was so resolute and so full of sorrow that not only was Rudolf alarmed for this reason, but Princess Osa also, at the window, wondered what ailed him and why he wore such a long face, and she now noticed that his horse was all in black and that his horse waited for him across the bridge.

"Not," said she, "that I care what becomes of the important reason. Yet she did not leave the window, but watched very intently to see what M. de Merosilles would do."

For a long while he talked with Rudolf on the bridge, Rudolf seeming more serious than he was wont to be, and at last the marquis bent to kiss the prince's hand, and the prince raised him and kissed him on either cheek, and then the marquis went and mounted his horse and rode off slowly and unattended into the glades of the forest Zenda, but the prince, with a string of his shoulders and a frown on his brow, entered under the portcullis and disappeared from his sister's view. Upon this the princess, assuming as

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