

THE WAGER OF THE MARQUIS DE MEROSAILLES.

BY ANTHONY HOPE
"The Prisoner of Zenda"
"The Dolly Dialogues" Etc.

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air of great carelessness, walked down from the room where she was and faced her brother, sitting still in his boots and drinking wine, and she said:

"M. de Merosailles has taken his leave then?"

"Even so, madam," rejoined Rudolf. "Then she broke into a fierce attack on the marquis, and on her brother also, for a man, said she, is known by his friends, and what a man must Rudolf be to have a friend like the Marquis de Merosailles!"

"Most brothers!" she said in fiery temper, "would make him answer for what he has done with his life, but you laugh. Nay, I dare say you had a hand in it."

"As to this last charge the prince had the discretion to say nothing. He chose rather to answer the first part of what she said, and shrugging his shoulders again rejoined, 'The fact saves the trouble, for he has gone off to kill himself.'"

"To kill himself?" she said, half incredulous, but also half believing, because of the marquis' gloomy looks and black clothes.

"To kill himself," repeated Rudolf. "For in the first place you are angry, and he cannot live, and in the second he has behaved like a rogue, so he cannot live, and in the third place you are as lovely a sister, that he cannot live, and in the first, second and third places he is a fool, so he cannot live." And the prince finished his flagon of wine with every sign of ill humor in his manner.

"He is well dead!" she cried.

"Oh, as you please," said he. "He is not the first brave man who has died on your account." And he rose and strode out of the room very angrily, for he had a great friendship for M. de Merosailles and had no patience with men who let love make dead bones of them.

The Princess Osa, being thus left alone, sat for a little while in deep thought. There rose before her mind the picture of M. de Merosailles riding mournfully through the gloom of the forest to his death, and although his conduct had been all that more than all that she had called it, yet it seemed hard that he should die for it. Moreover, if he now in truth felt what he had before feigned, the present truth was an atonement for the past treachery, and she said to herself that she could not sleep quietly that night if the marquis killed himself in the forest. Presently she wandered slowly up to her chamber and looked in the mirror and murmured low, "Poor fellow!"

And then with sudden speed she attired herself for riding and commanded her horse to be saddled and bridled and the arms and across the bridge and mounted, and, forbidding any one to accompany her, rode away into the forest, following the tracks of the hounds of M. de Merosailles' horse. It was then late afternoon, and the slanting rays of the sun, striking through the tree trunks, colored her face as she rode along, purring her horse and following hard on the track of the forlorn gentleman. But what she intended to do if she came up with him she did not think.

When she had ridden an hour or more, she saw his horse tethered to a trunk and there was a ring of trees and bushes near, encircling an open grassy spot. Herself dismounting and fastening her horse by the bridle, she sat down on the ground, and, looking up, saw a man standing before her, and his back was toward her. She held her breath and waited for a few moments. Then he took up the sword and felt the point and also the edge of it and sighed deeply, and the princess thought that this sorrowful mood became him better than any she had seen him in before.

Then he rose to his feet and took his sword by the blade beneath the hilt and turned the point of it toward his heart. And Osa, fearing that the deed would be done immediately, it called out eagerly: "My lord! My lord!" And M. de Merosailles turned round with a great start. When he saw her, he stood in astonishment, his hand still holding the blade of the sword. And, standing just on the other side of the trees, she said: "Is your offense against me to be cured by adding an offense against heaven and the church?" And she looked on him with great severity, yet her check was flushed, and after awhile she did not meet his glance.

"How came you here, madam?" he asked in wonder.

"I heard," she said, "that you meditated this great sin, and I rode after you to forbid it."

"Can you forbid what you cause?" he asked.

"I am not the cause of it," she said, "but your own treachery."

"It is true. I am not worthy to live!" cried the marquis, smiting the hilt of his sword to the ground.

"I pray you, madam, leave me alone to die, for I cannot tear myself from the world so long as I see your face." And as he spoke he knelt on one knee, as though he were doing homage to her.

The princess caught at a bough of the tree under which she stood and pulled the bough down so that the leaves half hid her face, and the marquis saw little more than her eyes from among the foliage. And thus being better able to speak to him she said softly:

"And dare you die unforgiven?"

"I had prayed for forgiveness before you found me, madam," said he.

"Of heaven, my lord!"

"Of heaven, madam, for of heaven I dare to ask it."

The princess swung up and down, and now Osa's gleaming hair and arm her cheek and always her eyes were seen through the leaves. And presently the marquis heard a voice asking:

"Does heaven forgive unasked?"

"And," said she, "are we poor mortals kinder than heaven?"

The marquis rose and took a step or two toward where the knight swayed up and down and then he knelt again.

"A great sinner," said he, "cannot believe himself forgiven."

"Then he wrongs the power of whom he seeks forgiveness, for forgiveness is divine."

"Then I will ask it, and if I obtain it I shall die happy."

Again the knight swayed, and Osa said:

"Nay, if you will die you may die unforgiven."

M. de Merosailles, hearing these words, sprang to his feet and came toward the bough until he was close to it, and the sun's rays struck on her eyes, and they danced in the sun, and her cheeks were reddened by the same or some other cause. And the evening was very still and there seemed no sounds in the forest.

"I cannot believe that you forgive, the crime is too great," said he.

"It was great, yet I forgive."

"I cannot believe it," said he again, and he looked at the point of his sword, and then he looked through the leaves at the princess.

"I can no more than say that if you will live I will forgive, and we will forget."

"By heaven, no," he whispered. "If I must forget to be forgiven then I will remember and be unforgotten."

The faintest laugh reached him from among the foliage.

"Then I will forget, and you shall be forgiven," said she.

The marquis put up his hand and held a leaf aside, and he said again, "I cannot believe myself forgiven. Is there no other token of forgiveness?"

"Pray, my lord, do not put the leaves aside."

"I still must die unless I have some warrant of forgiveness."

"Ah, you try to make me think that."

"By heaven, it is true." And again he pointed his sword at his heart, and he swore on his honor that unless she gave him a token he would kill himself.

"Oh," said the princess with great her chamber and looked in the mirror and murmured low, "Poor fellow!"

"Then I should have been dead by now—dead, unforgotten."

"But you will still die."

"Yes, I must still die, unless—"

"Sheathe your sword, my lord. The sun strikes it, and it dazzles my eyes."

"That cannot be, for your eyes are brighter than sun and sword together."

"Then I must shade them with the leaves."

"Yes, shade them with the leaves," he whispered. "Madam, is there no token of forgiveness?"

An absolute silence followed for a little while. Then Osa said:

"Why did you swear on your honor?"

"Because it is an oath that I cannot break."

"Indeed I wish that I had not come," sighed Princess Osa.

Again came silence. The bough was pressed down for an instant, then it swayed swiftly up again, and its leaves brushed the cheek of M. de Merosailles. And he laughed loud and joyfully.

"Something touched my cheek," said he.

"It must have been a leaf," said Princess Osa.

"Ah, a leaf?"

"I think so," said Princess Osa.

"Then it was a leaf of the tree of life," said M. de Merosailles.

"I wish some one would set me on my horse," said Osa.

"That you may ride back to the castle—alone?"

"Yes, unless you would relieve my brother's anxiety."

"It would be courteous to do that much," said the princess.

So they mounted and rode back through the forest. In an hour the princess had come, and in the space of something over two hours they returned, yet during all this time they spoke hardly a word, and although the sun was now set yet the glow remained on the face and in the eyes of Princess Osa, while M. de Merosailles, being forgiven, rode with a smile on his lips.

But when they came to the castle Prince Rudolf ran out to meet them, and he cried almost before he reached them:

"Hasten! Hasten! There is a life or death to lose if the marquis values a life of liberty. And when he came to them he told them that a waiting woman had been false to M. de Merosailles, and, after taking his money, had hid herself in his chamber and seen the first kiss that the princess gave him, and having made some pretext to gain a holiday had gone to the king, who, was hunting near, and betrayed the whole matter to him."

"And one of my gentlemen," he continued, "has ridden here to tell me in an hour the guards will be here, and if the king catches you, my lord, you will hang as sure as I live."

The princess turned very pale, but M. de Merosailles said laughingly, "I ask you, parson, sir, but the king dares not hang me, for I am a gentleman and a subject of the king of France."

Non will hang you first and think of all that afterward. Come now, it is dusk. You shall dress yourself as my groom, and I will ride to the frontier, and you shall ride behind me, and thus you may get safe away. I cannot have you hanged over such a trifle."

"I would have given my life willingly for what you call a trifle, sir," said the marquis with a bow to Osa.

"Then have the trifle and life, too," said Rudolf desperately. "Come in with me, and I will give you your liberty."

When the prince and M. de Merosailles came out again on the lawns, the evening had fallen and it was dark, and their horses stood at the end of the bridge, and by the horses stood the princess.

"Quick," said she, "for a present we came in, bringing a load of wood, saw a troop of men coming over the hill, and in a trice they are the king's guard."

"Mount, mad!" cried the prince to M. de Merosailles, who was now dressed as a groom. "Perhaps we can get clear, or perhaps they will not dare to stop us."

But the marquis hesitated a little, for he did not like to run away, and the princess ran a little way forward and, shading her eyes with her hand, cried: "See there! I see the gleam of steel in the dark. They are riding down."

Then Prince Rudolf sprang on his horse, calling again to M. de Merosailles: "Quick! Quick! Your life hangs on it!"

Then at last the marquis, though he was most reluctant to depart, was about to spring on his horse, when the princess turned and glided back swiftly to them. And let it be remembered that evening had fallen thick and black, she came to her brother and put out her hand and grasped his hand and said:

"My lord, I forgive your wrong, and I thank you for your courtesy, and I with you forever."

Prince Rudolf, astonished, gazed at her without speaking, but she, moving very quickly in spite of the darkness, ran to where M. de Merosailles was about to spring on his horse and she flung one arm lightly about his neck and she said:

"Farewell, dear brother. God preserve you. See that no harm comes to my good friend M. de Merosailles."

And she kissed him lightly on the cheek. Then she suddenly gave a loud cry of dismay, exclaiming, "Alas, what have I done? Ah, what have I done?" And she hid her face in her two hands.

Prince Rudolf burst into a loud, short laugh, yet he said nothing to his sister, but again urged the marquis to mount his horse. And the marquis, who was in a sad tumult of triumph and of woe, leaped up, and they rode out, and, turning their faces toward the forest, set spurs to their horses and vanished at breakneck speed into the gloom. And no sound was there to give them the troops of the king's guard clattered at a canter up to the end of the bridge, where the Princess Osa stood. But when their captain saw the princess he drew up.

"What is your errand, sir?" she asked most coldly and haughtily.

"Madam," said the captain, "we are ordered to bring the Marquis de Merosailles alive or dead into the king's presence, and we have information that he is in the castle, unless indeed he were one of the horsemen who rode away just now."

"The horsemen you saw were my brother the prince and his groom," said Osa. "But if you think that M. de Merosailles is in the castle, pray search the castle from keep to cellar, and if you find him carry him to my father according to your orders."

Then the troops dismounted in great haste and searched the castle from keep to cellar, and they found the clothes of the marquis and the white powder with which he had whitened his face, but the marquis they did not find. And the captain came again to the princess, who still stood at the end of the bridge, and said:

"Madam, he is not in the castle."

"Is he not?" said she, and she turned away, and, walking to the middle of the bridge, looked down into the water of the moat.

"Was it in truth the prince's groom who rode with him, madam?" asked the captain, following her.

"In truth, sir, it was so dark," answered the princess, "that I could not myself clearly distinguish the man's face."

"Um, was the prince, for I saw you embrace him, madam."

"You do well to conclude that was my brother," said Osa, smiling a little. "And to the other man, you gave your hand."

"And now I give it to you," said she with haughty insolence. "And if to my father's servant why not to my brother's?" And she held out her hand that he might kiss it and turned away from him and looked down into the water again.

"Let us find M. de Merosailles' clothes in the castle," persisted the captain.

"He may well have left something of his in the castle," said the princess.

"I will ride after them," cried the captain.

"I doubt if you will catch them," said the princess, for by now the pair had been gone half an hour and the frontier was but ten miles from the castle, and they could not be overtaken.

Yet the captain rode off with his men and pursued till he met Prince Rudolf returning alone, having seen M. de Merosailles safe on his way. And Rudolf paid the sum of a furling crowns to the marquis, so that the fugitive was well provided for his journey and, traveling with many plays of horses, made good his escape from the clutches of King Henry.

But the Princess Osa staid a long time looking down at the water in the moat. And sometimes she sighed and then again she frowned, and, although nobody was there and it was very dark into the bargain, more than once she blushed. And at last she turned to go into the castle, and as she went she murmured softly to herself:

"After I kissed him the first time I knew—it was in pity. And why I kissed him the second time I know—it was in forgiveness. But why I kissed him the third time, or what that kiss meant," said Osa, "heaven knows."

And she went in with a smile on her lips.

THE END.

Don't Tobacco Spit and Smoke Your Life Away.

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