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THE WAGER

by Marsh Haris

It had been a miserable day, dull, uninteresting, and entirely too hot. But as is often the case, miserable days have a way of correcting themselves in the evening. This particular day, however, insisted on being different. Truth to tell, as it wore on it grew duller and less bearable by the hour, until when it finally came to its official close at midnight it had earned something of a distinction for boredom and weariness.

Paris or no Paris, Russ decided, this had been one of the most tiring, drab days he had ever spent. For some inexplicable reason nothing had been in tune, everything was somehow amiss. Breakfast at the Chez Henri had been all but unedible, he had gotten nothing in the post but bills, no one came to call on him, there was no decent theatre in town to see, he got caught in a thunderstorm on his way home from a short stroll into Montmartre, the neighbours in the adjacent apartment quarrelled all evening, and his phonograph went on the blink.

But still there was his good old British fortitude to fall back on. Never, ever admit total defeat. Indeed, one last, valiant effort must be made. After all, if one must play the roll of the vanquished, he should at least be able to comfort himself with the knowledge that he has done his damndest in the struggle.

Therefore, smoothing down the back of his wheat-blond hair, he closed the door of his apartment and plunged down the stairway into the narrow, twisting streets of Paris. A walk, as they say in American melodramas, might do him good. And of course, being an inveterate opportunist, one never quite knew what one might encounter in the dimly lit avenues of the old city.

The night was hot and humid and at times even a trifle unpleasant to the nostrils, though there was at least a faint breeze coming in from the Seine. As he walked, having absolutely nothing to do and almost nothing even to think about, he began to take in the most minute details about him. It was indeed a much overrated place, unclean, crowded, poorly laid out, many times slow and dull, and many times hostile to its visitors. Oh yes, there was the Eiffel Tower, the Arch of Triumph, the Louvre, the Champs Elysées, et cetera. But exactly how long was one expected to stand intrigued by the same old things?

No, no, that wasn't quite fair; he was simply and undeniably in an irritable mood. In all justice, he still, after nearly two years of living in Paris, found the great landmarks of the famous city quite fascinating.

Nevertheless, he was still bored. More accurately, he was a trifle lonely. Oh not lonely in general, just lonely at the moment.

He paused in his stroll momentarily and cupped his hand about the flame of his cigarette lighter, drawing a heavy draft of smoke into his lungs.

«Light, monsieur?»

Russ looked up quickly, almost startled by the unexpected voice. He hadn't been aware of anyone walking in the vicinity. Focusing, he found himself gazing into expertly painted female eyes, eyes that seemed to bore deeply into his own.

«Yes, certainly,» he said in an almost questioning tone, then held the flame to the not unattractive young woman's cigarette. The aurora of the fire reflected dazzlingly in the blue-black hair above her forehead.

She lifted her head, disgorged a jet of smoke above her, then lowered her gaze again, fixing it solidly on Russ's face.

«I smoke Gauloises. Have you tried them?»

Russ was puzzled. «No,» he said, still not quite at ease. «No, I don't think I have.»

«They're actually made in America, you know.»

«Oh really? I didn't know that.»

«You eh . . . , you don't walk as if you had any particular destination. Perhaps you're restless; perhaps you are eh . . . looking for something?»

Quite suddenly then the purpose of the conversation dawned on him. His eyes narrowed irritably and his hands went to his hips. Now he was staring at her with the same intenseness that she had stared at him.

«Like what, for instance?»

The young woman smiled. «Well,» she said teasingly, «like for instance . . . something to do, something that would amuse you, shall we say. Yes?»

Russ glared incredulously at her. This was the last straw! Here was living proof that things could always get worse, no matter how intolerable they had seemed before. What hateful twist of fate had set about to goad and torment him with the most unkindest cut of all? For a moment he was speechless, quite speechless with an awful rage. Then, unable to contain himself longer, he leased forth a veritable cesspool of words upon the dumbfounded *fille de joie*, calling her everything in both French and English he could think of, blasting her with every conceivable curse.

Finally, all but out of breath, he levelled a contemptuous finger at her and said, «You have the nerve, the gall, to proposition *me*! For your information, I wouldn't touch you or any other female on this earth! The lot of you bore me to tears with your bouncing breasts and your fatty hips, your purring voices and your demure glances. You think all you have to do is smile at a man, any man, and he's yours, just like that ! Well you'd be surprised by how many men think you're ridiculous, you're disgusting. And just so there's no misunderstanding between us, it just so happens that I *am* out looking for, how did you put it, something to do, something that would amuse me. More to the point, I'm looking for precisely the same thing you are. You're out here scouring the streets for a man, well so am I! The only difference is, I'm not asking a price. So just you understand that I'm your competition, honey, not your business!»

The comely creature stood before him, her fingers dug deeply into her mass of black hair, laughing uproariously. Russ looked at her hatefully for a second, then turned and began to walk away. Abruptly, the woman reached out and caught his arm, still laughing loudly.

«No, no, don't go. I think I like you.»

«But you see, I don't like you. Now will you please let go of me?»

«My name is Mijanou. Yes, I like you very much. I mean it.»

«Yes, apparently you liked me enough to proposition me,» he flung back bitinglly.

«Oh, but that was different. Then you were just a man, like all the others I meet. But believe me, you are not at all like the others. This has never happened to me before. Oh, what an incredible blunder for me to make. Believe me,» she said, beginning to calm her laughter somewhat, «if my girl friends heard about this they'd laugh me right off the streets!»

Russ looked at her strangely. What an odd thing she was. Here he had just called her every name on record and she was laughing lightheartedly and telling him she liked him. And the thing that disturbed him the most was that he believed her. Mijanou doubtlessly was quite serious.

Then in an instant the pure absurdity of the situation struck him and he too began to laugh until the two of them were standing there filling the night air with peals of laughter.

«But Mijanou, if you only knew what a day this has been for me. If you did you'd understand why I reacted the way I did. It's just that the irony of it all was too much for me, so completely monstrous. I really should apologize for the things I said to you . . .»

«No, wait,» she said, interrupting, gazing a short distance down the street. «Keep your apology for later. Right now there's work to do.» She looked at Russ and grinned, then glanced again over his shoulder.

Russ turned curiously and saw a young American sailor some short distance away reading, or attempting unsuccessfully it seemed, something posted on the wall of a closed newsstand. From Russ's vantage point, the young sailor was far from being unattractive and more than adequately built. Most interesting, most interesting, indeed.

«Excuse me,» Mijanou said with a broad smile. «I wouldn't want to lose two in a row, you know.»

«Oh no you don't!» Russ corrected, seizing her by the arm. «You've had your turn. I'm next, if you don't mind.»

«I'll be damned if you are. I saw him first!»

«Very well, why not let's be sporting about this thing. We'll both have a crack at him.»

«What! Are you kidding? You don't have a chance in the world!»

«Oh you don't think so? All right, I'll bet you . . . I'll bet you two francs that he'll turn you down and come with me.»

«And just what makes you think I trust you that much? You'll go down there and tell him of the bet and just for the sake of winning you'll offer to pay him to refuse me!»

«Good Lord, what a sneaky mind. Perish the thought forever; I wouldn't think of such under-handed tactics. Go ahead, you be first. But don't forget, two francs.»

«Two francs it is! You stay right here. Don't you forget the two francs either!»

«Wild horses couldn't budge me,» he grinned. «But you're wasting time. May the best man win?»

«Woman!» she flung back arrogantly.

Russ watched her adjust a strand of hair about her face, smooth down the front of her skirt, and move confidently down the street toward the newsstand.

Russ took out another cigarette and leaned against the iron fence that ran along the edge of the park by the street. A distance away now, Mijanou came up close to the sailor and apparently asked for the time as he immediately looked at his wrist watch and said something to her. An unheard conversation then ensued with the sailor smiling attractively every now and then, augmented by an occasional audible laugh from Mijanou.

At length, Russ lit a second cigarette and had almost begun to tire of standing there when ten minutes had passed and nothing had happened. Then suddenly the sailor lifted both his hands in a kind of shrugging gesture and seemed to be trying to leave, but was being detained almost forcibly by the persistent Mijanou.

Not one to miss his cue, Russ sauntered languidly down the street toward

them. As he came up beside them he merely glanced their way casually and pretended to pass on by.

«Pardon, monsieur,» the handsome young sailor suddenly spoke up in an extremely bad French accent. «Parlez-vous anglais?»

Russ stopped and smiled. «As a matter of fact, I do. I'm from England where it was invented.»

Gosh am I glad you came along. I understand almost no French and this lady is trying to tell me something. Would you mind translating for us for just a second?»

«Not at all, I'd be delighted. What shall I tell her?»

«Tell her that I'm terribly sorry, but that the only time I understood her was when she asked me if I had the time.»

«Quite simple. Mijanou, dear friend,» Russ said, lapsing again into excellent French, «the young man has asked me to tell you that he hates to disappoint you, but that he's not in the least interested in your proposal and that he has something much more important to do and must be leaving.»

«Is that what he really said? Oh, if only I understood English! Very well, you tell him that as far as I'm concerned he can go throw himself in the Seine. You think you've had a bad day! Look at the luck I'm having.»

«Quite,» Russ said. «Shall I tell him that?»

«No! You know very well what to tell him!»

«True, true, so I do.» He then turned back to the sailor and said in English, «Mademoiselle merely wanted to know if taxis ever came through here at this hour. I naturally explained to her that they do and she is going to wait for one, which should be any minute now.»

«Thank you. I appreciate your helping us out. Don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't come along.»

«Not at all, it was my pleasure, I assure you. Are you walking this way?»

«Yes, I was on my way to La Place de la Concorde, but I'm not exactly certain how to get there.»

«Well, in that case I'll show you. I'm going that way myself.»

«Wonderful. Au revoir, mademoiselle.»

Mijanou did not answer, but merely lifted an eyebrow at the two of them.

Russ grinned sheepishly, and yet victoriously at the same time. «Au revoir, mademoiselle,» he echoed teasingly.

The two men turned and strolled away together down the dimly lit street, leaving Mijanou standing furiously by the newsstand.

The sailor glanced over to Russ and gave a slight grin. «We turn here at the next corner for Concorde.»

«You mean you knew where it was all the time?»

«I also speak quite a passable French,» he confessed, then burst out laughing.

«Wait,» Russ said, stopping in his tracks. «Don't go away; I've forgotten something. I'll be right back.»

Quickly, he dashed back to the newsstand where Mijanou was still standing, confounded by the whole thing.

«Here,» she said, extending her hand, «two francs. Now get lost!»