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# Love of Seven Dolls

Paul Gallico



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LOVE OF SEVEN DOLLS

PAUL GALLICO



Paul Gallico was born in New York City, of Italian and Austrian parentage, in 1897, and attended Columbia University. From 1922 to 1936 he worked on the *New York Daily News* as sports editor, columnist, and assistant managing editor. In 1936 he bought a house on top of a hill at Salcombe in South Devon and settled down with a Great Dane and twenty-three assorted cats. It was in 1941 that he made his name with *The Snow Goose*, a classic little story of Dunkirk which became a world-wide best-seller. Having served as a gunner's mate in the U.S. Navy in 1918, he was again active as a war correspondent with the American Expeditionary Force in 1944. Paul Gallico, who lives partly in France, is a first-class fencer and a keen sea-fisherman. His books, which have achieved exceptionally high sales on both sides of the Atlantic, include *Jennie* (1950), *The Small Miracle* (1952), *Snowflake* (1952), *Ludmila* (1955), *Thomasina* (1957), *Flowers for Mrs Harris* (1958), *Mrs Harris Goes to New York* (1960), and *Too Many Ghosts* (1961). He has also written *The Steadfast Man*, a scholarly study of St Patrick, and *The Hurricane Story* (1959), a 'biography' of the famous fighter.

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PAUL GALLICO

*Love of Seven Dolls*

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*To*  
*Burr Tillstrom*  
*and Fran Allison*



## PART ONE

IN Paris, in the spring of our times, a young girl was about to throw herself into the Seine.

She was a thin, awkward creature with a wide mouth and short black hair. Her body was all bones and hollows where there should have been curves and flesh. Her face was appealing, but it was now gaunt with hunger and the misery of failure. Her eyes were haunting, large, liquid, dark, and filled with despair.

Her name was Marelle Guizec, but her nickname was Mouche. She was an orphan, a Bretonne from the village of Plouharg, near St Brieuc. Wretched though she was, some of the mystery of this mysterious land still clung to her. It manifested itself in the grace with which she walked as though still clad in the swinging peasant skirts, the gravity of her glance, her innocence, and primitive mind in which for all her youth – she was only twenty-two – were dark corners of Celtic brooding. One of these was now leading her to her death.

She wished to die, for like many young girls from the provinces she had come to Paris to try to succeed in the theatre. She had failed most miserably. There was truly no single soul in the world who cared what became of her now that she had been dismissed from the lowly *Moulin Bleu Revue* as incompetent and incapable of inspiring interest or desire amongst the patrons. There was no one who was her friend. The paltry francs she would receive would feed and shelter her for only a few days. After that she must starve or sell herself.

Do you remember Paris that May when spring came



early and the giant candelabra of the chestnut trees in bloom illuminated the beautiful city?

The sun-washed days were warm, but the nights still cold and often windy. By day Paris played at summer; the children appeared with their nurses by the Rond Point, the scent of perfumed women lingered on the boulevards, the gay shops glittered in the sunlight; the sky was a canopy of that particular blue that seems to exist only over France. But in the evening, the chill drove people off the streets.

It was for this reason that the early season street carnival beyond the Pont Neuilly was preparing to pack up and depart in disappointment, for it had expected to do most of its business after dark.

Its chain of nakedly glaring electric-light bulbs and smoking gasoline flares stretched along one side of the Avenue Général de Gaulle from the Rond Point de la Défense all the way to the bridge across the Seine that gave entrance to Paris from the west.

The clangour of the street fair, the carousel music, the cries of the barkers and snapping of rifles in the shooting galleries, the ringing of bells and snorting of the engines that operated the rides had given way to the more prosaic sounds of dismantling, hammering and sawing, and the noise of boards and metal sheets being thrown to the ground and flats being loaded on trucks was drowning out the last of the mechanical music-makers.

Only a few hardy stragglers defied the chill breeze and hung about as swings, whip rides, auto dodgems, stages, and tents began to come down. By morning, nothing but the litter in the street and the worn patches on the earth at the side of the broad avenue would indicate where the fair had been.

In the draughty, outdoor canvas-enclosed square that served the shivering girls of the tawdry *Moulin Bleu Revue* as a dressing-room, Mouche, having surrendered the scanty

bits of costume that had been lent her, donned her clothes and reflected for the last time upon the collapse of her hopes.

The cheap grind and strip show was packing to move on to Ste Germaine, but she had not been good enough even to keep this job and go along. At the conclusion of the final performance that night the manager had discharged her, saying, 'Too thin, too thin, my child. Our girls run more to meat and juice. I heard someone in the audience say of you, "Here comes that little plucked chicken again." Sorry, but you won't do. If a girl cannot sing or dance, at least she must look like something.'

It was true. Mouche excited pity rather than desire.

Her story was the usual one of the stage-struck girl encouraged by perhaps a local success at some amateur theatricals. Orphaned during the war, she had lived with a great-aunt, who had likewise died when she was but sixteen. She had then gone to St Briec and secured a job cleaning the town hall, saving her money until she had sufficient to make the journey to Paris.

And there she had come face to face with the fact that she had neither the talent nor the physical equipment to further her ambitions.

She had been pawed by dirty men and stripped by agents and managers, who had examined the merchandise of her body and in the end had laughed and turned her out undamaged, for her innocence and chastity were an affront to their consciences and they wished to have her out of their sight.

Occasionally she had succeeded in securing a trial in the cabarets of Pigalle and Montmartre, and this had kept her from starvation, but she never was able to hold a job, and, descending always lower, had ended with the strip revue in the street fair and now had been judged unfit for this most miserable of forms of entertainment. Not even to the

tawdry audiences that filed through the tents for a few francs could her body deliver a single, solitary illusion.

It was this that determined her to do away with herself, for the dismissal pointed up the fact that even had she come to the point of selling herself to keep from starvation she would have found no buyers.

Mouche looked about her once more at the chattering girls who at least were useful in that they could walk across a plank stage and make men shout, or laugh and whistle. Then she collected her few belongings and packed them into the small straw valise she had brought with her, as she had expected to be travelling with them in the bus to their next stop.

She would have no further need for these articles, but she could not bring herself to abandon them. The straw suitcase would be found standing on the parapet of the Pont Neuilly in the morning when the police came with their long poles and fished her body out of the Seine.

She picked up the bag and without a backward glance went out of the enclosure. It seemed as if in anticipation of her rendezvous the light was already extinguished from her eyes. Her thin shoulders had the droop of the beaten girl so easily recognized in France, the soon-to-be suicide. . . .

The manager emerged just then and recognizing it, was, for a moment, moved to pity and tempted to reverse his decision and call her back. But he hesitated. If one had pity on every little scarecrow from the provinces, where would one end?

And yet there was something appealing about the little one. He had felt it. Not what the customers wanted, but still – if one could catch what it was . . . By the time he had decided to yield to his better nature and called after her, ‘Hola! Mouche! Wait. Come back. Perhaps . . .’ she was gone.

Mouche, marching unseeing, like one already dead, towards the Seine, thought briefly of her childhood in Brittany and saw again the blue-green seas crashing in white foam on to the black rocks, the sunny fields cut by crooked stone walls, and the flames of the poppies from the midst of which rose the ancient stone crosses and still more ancient Druid menhirs.

The fisherboats beat their way home; children played in the sand; the postman on his bicycle rode by; women stopped for a gossip outside the baker's cottage, and for a moment Mouche smelled the fresh bread and crisp rolls. She was in church again and heard the rustle of starched head-dresses and the sigh of the organ. Snatches of melodies of old songs drifted through her mind, and for an instant she saw her mother's work-worn hands arranging her First Communion dress. Recollections came to her of old friends, a grey rabbit she had once owned and a tortoise, a yellow cat, and a duck that had only one leg. She remembered the eyes of wild things that sometimes peered from the depths of hedges in not unfriendly fashion.

Looking into this bright garden of life as through a door opened in a wall, yet she could not see how much there was to live for, that she was young and that one could build anew upon the ashes of failure. The black, smoky night, so noisy, cold and hostile, encouraged only the sunless corners of her mind. She hurried forward as one who goes unseeing.

Something, or someone cried out of the darkness: 'Hello there, you with the suitcase! Where are you going and what's your hurry?'

Mouche paused, startled and bewildered, for the shrill little voice obviously was directed at her, but she could not make out whence it came. The impudence of the query angered her for it had the effect of returning her to a world she had in effect already departed.

The next words reaching her out of the darkness startled her even more.

'It's cold at the bottom of the river, little one, and the eels and the crayfish eat your flesh.'

This was magic and Mouche had all the superstition and belief in the supernatural of the Bretonne. Fearfully she gazed about her for the source of the voice that could guess her secret.

By the wavering light of a gasoline flare she saw only an empty puppet booth with an oilcloth sign across the top announcing, *CAPITAINE COQ ET SA FAMILLE*. Near by, on one side, a dirty-looking gipsy fortune-teller was quarrelling with her husband over the small pickings while they occupied themselves with dismantling their tent. On the other, two men were engaged in loading a strength-testing machine on to a small truck. No one appeared to be aware of the presence of the girl.

The insistent piping voice attacked her again: 'What's the big tragedy? Your boy friend give you the air? There's plenty more fish in the sea.'

Peering through the smoky haze Mouche now saw that the puppet booth was not entirely deserted as she had first thought. A doll was perched on the counter, or at any rate, half a doll, for no legs were visible, a boy with red hair, bulb nose, and pointed ears. He was regarding her with impertinent, painted eyes and a curiously troubled expression on his countenance. In the shifting yellow flicker of the gasoline flare he seemed to be beckoning to her.

'Well?' he said. 'Cat got your tongue? Speak up when you're spoken to.'

In her first alarm, Mouche had set down her valise. Now she picked it up and walked with it slowly closer to the booth to examine this astonishing little creature.

Still feeling strangely indignant at being thus uncere-

moniously accosted she heard herself to her surprise reply: 'Really, what makes you think it is any of your concern?'

The puppet looked her carefully up and down. 'Oh,' he said. 'Out of a job, down at the heels and huffy too. I was only trying to be polite and pass the time.'

'By speaking to strangers to whom you have not been introduced?' Mouche chided. 'And getting personal too. How would you like it if I . . .?' She paused, realizing for the first time that she was addressing the little creature as though it were a human being. And yet it was not really strange that she should, for its attitudes and movements were so real and even the expression on the painted face seemed to change with the angle of the head.

'Oh, I wouldn't mind,' he concluded for her. 'Everyone likes to talk about themselves. Would you care to hear my life story? I was born in a tree on Christmas Eve. . . .'

There was a swift movement and a girl puppet appeared on the counter. She had golden ringlets, wide, staring eyes, and a small, discontented mouth.

She turned this way and that, appearing to inspect Mouche from all angles. Then she said, 'My goodness, Carrot Top, where do you find them?'

The leprechaun puppet took a bow and said, 'Not bad, eh?'

The girl gave a little shriek. 'My goodness, Carrots, you surely don't think *she's* pretty . . . Why she's nothing but skin and bones.'

Carrot Top with a twist of his head managed to look reflective. 'Well, I'll admit her legs aren't much to look at, Gigi, but she has nice eyes and there's something about her that . . .'

'Country trash, if you ask me, and probably no better than she should be,' Gigi murmured and, folding her hands piously, gazed skywards.

'Yes,' Carrot Top agreed. 'A country cousin all right. But still you know . . .'

Mouche felt that it was enough. She stamped her foot at the mocking little creatures and cried, 'Really! How dare you two stand there and discuss me . . . Don't you know that is the worst manners?'

Carrot Top seemed taken aback and looked worried. He replied, 'Dear me. Perhaps you are right. We've all been running somewhat wild of late. Maybe what we need is a little discipline. Why don't you try saying something rude to us?'

Gigi flounced petulantly. 'Well, I for one don't intend to remain here to be abused by a scarecrow,' and vanished beneath the counter.

Carrot Top looked after her and shook his head slowly. 'She's not getting any better-tempered. Well, go ahead. I don't mind being insulted.'

Mouche could not repress a smile. 'I can't. I think I like you.'

'Oh! Do you really?' Carrot Top contrived to look both pleased and startled. 'That wants some thinking over. I'll see you later maybe.'

He vanished likewise but was immediately replaced by the fore part of a red fox with a long, pointed nose and a sardonic grin. There was a leer in his avid eyes and a worse one in his voice. For a moment he watched the girl warily, then appearing to smile a sly, oily smile, rasped at Mouche, 'Hullo, baby!'

Mouche gave him a severe look. 'Don't you hullo *me*,' she admonished. 'You're a wicked scoundrel if ever I saw one.'

The fox turned his head on his neck so that he looked hurt. 'I am not. I can't help my looks. Come on over here and see. Put your hand out.'

Mouche moved closer to the booth and extended her

hand gingerly. The expression on the pale brow beneath her cheap little hat was half worried, yet she felt herself charmed. The fox gently snuggled his chin on to Mouche's palm and heaved a deep sigh. 'There,' he said, 'you see how you've misjudged me?' He cocked an eye up at her.

Mouche was not to be deceived. She remarked, 'I'm not sure I have at all.'

'Heart like a kitten,' the fox insisted, snuggling his chin deeper into the cup of Mouche's palm, and then added, 'The trouble is, nobody trusts me. You would trust me, wouldn't you?'

She was about to reply that she wouldn't dream of doing so, when he moved his head and looked up at her once more. His mouth opened and closed silently. Surely it was the smoky light and the dancing shadows, but Mouche thought she saw such an expression of yearning, such a desire for trust on the sharp, clever face that she felt herself unaccountably touched and cried from her own heart, 'Oh yes. I would . . .'

She had all but forgotten whither she had been bound, or why.

Nor did it strike her as at all strange that she should be standing there by the counter of a puppet booth conversing with a scallywag of a fox. Where she came from, one talked not only with the little animals of the fields and the birds in the trees, but the trees themselves and the running brooks, and often one whispered one's innermost secrets or heart's desire to one of the grey dolmens that stood so mysteriously in a meadow.

The fox sighed again. 'I knew I'd find someone innocent enough some day. What's your name, baby?'

'Marelle. But they call me Petite Mouche.'

'Little fly, eh? My name is Mr Reynardo, J. L. Reynardo - Rey to my friends. Where are you from?'



‘Plouharg, near St Briec.’

The fox suddenly raised his head so that he was looking at her sidelong out of one wicked eye. He quoted from an old proverb, ‘Beware a sleeping dog, a praying drunk, or a Bretonne.’

Mouche snatched her hand away and quoted back at him: ‘When the fox preaches, guard your geese. . . .’

Mr Reynardo let out a yapping bark of laughter and retired to the side of the booth. ‘Kid, you’ve got some guts in that skinny carcase of yours. Hasn’t she, friends?’

This last was addressed to the workmen who had finished loading the lorry and were now standing by listening.

‘She has your measure, old boy,’ one of them replied, grinning.

The fox yapped again and then called down below the counter, ‘Hey, Ali! Come up here a moment and see if you can scare this one.’

The upper portion of a huge, tousle-headed, hideous, yet pathetic-looking giant rose slowly from beneath and stared fixedly at Mouche, who stared back. She could not help herself.

Mr Reynardo performed the introductions: ‘This is our giant, Alifanfaron – Ali for short. Ali, this is Mouche and she’s crazy about me.’

Mouche started to reply indignantly, ‘I am not,’ but thought better of it and decided to let it go and see what would happen. The giant seemed to be trying desperately to recall something and finally said in a mild, friendly voice, ‘Fi-fo-fe . . . No no – fo-fe-fi – Oh dear. That isn’t it either. I never seem to get it straight.’

Mouche prompted him, ‘Fe-fi-fo . . .’

Ali nodded his head. ‘Of course. And then the last one is *fum*. But what’s the use? I don’t really frighten you, do I?’

On an odd impulse, Mouche solemnly felt her heart beat