

Tales of the Argonauts

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The Rose Of Tuolumne

CHAPTER I

It was nearly two o'clock in the morning. The lights were out in Robinson's Hall, where there had been dancing and revelry; and the moon, riding high, painted the black windows with silver. The cavalcade, that an hour ago had shocked the sedate pines with song and laughter, were all dispersed. One enamoured swain had ridden east, another west, another north, another south; and the object of their adoration, left within her bower at Chemisal Ridge, was calmly going to bed.

I regret that I am not able to indicate the exact stage of that process. Two chairs were already filled with delicate inwrappings and white confusion; and the young lady herself, half-hidden in the silky threads of her yellow hair, had at one time borne a faint resemblance to a partly-husked ear of Indian corn. But she was now clothed in that one long, formless garment that makes all women equal; and the round shoulders and neat waist, that an hour ago had been so fatal to the peace of mind of Four Forks, had utterly disappeared. The face above it was very pretty: the foot below, albeit shapely, was not small. "The flowers, as a general thing, don't raise their heads MUCH to look after me," she had said with superb frankness to one of her lovers.

The expression of the "Rose" to-night was contentedly placid. She walked slowly to the window, and, making the smallest possible peephole through the curtain, looked out. The motionless figure of a horseman still lingered on the road, with an excess of devotion that only a coquette, or a woman very much in love, could tolerate. The "Rose," at that moment, was neither, and, after a reasonable pause, turned away, saying quite audibly that it was "too ridiculous for any thing." As she came back to her dressing-table, it was noticeable that she walked steadily and erect, without that slight affectation of lameness common to people with whom bare feet are only an episode. Indeed, it was only four years ago, that without shoes or stockings, a long-limbed, colty girl, in a waistless calico gown, she had leaped from the tailboard of her father's emigrant-wagon when it first drew up at Chemisal Ridge. Certain wild habits of the "Rose" had outlived transplanting and cultivation.

A knock at the door surprised her. In another moment she had leaped into bed, and with darkly-frowning eyes, from its secure recesses demanded "Who's there?"

An apologetic murmur on the other side of the door was the response.

"Why, father!--is that you?"

There were further murmurs, affirmative, deprecatory, and persistent.

"Wait," said the "Rose." She got up, unlocked the door, leaped nimbly into bed again, and said, "Come."

The door opened timidly. The broad, stooping shoulders, and grizzled head, of a man past the middle age, appeared: after a moment's hesitation, a pair of large, diffident feet, shod with canvas slippers, concluded to follow. When the apparition was complete, it closed the door softly, and stood there,--a very shy ghost indeed,--with apparently more than the usual spiritual indisposition to begin a conversation. The "Rose" resented this impatiently, though, I fear, not altogether intelligibly.

"Do, father, I declare!"

"You was abed, Jinny," said Mr. McClosky slowly, glancing, with a singular mixture of masculine awe and paternal pride, upon the two chairs and their contents,--"you was abed and ondressed."

"I was."

"Surely," said Mr. McClosky, seating himself on the extreme edge of the bed, and painfully tucking his feet away under it,--"surely." After a pause, he rubbed a short, thick, stumpy beard, that bore a general resemblance to a badly-worn blacking-brush, with the palm of his hand, and went on, "You had a good time, Jinny?"

"Yes, father."

"They was all there?"

"Yes, Rance and York and Ryder and Jack."

"And Jack!" Mr. McClosky endeavored to throw an expression of arch inquiry into his small, tremulous eyes; but meeting the unabashed, widely-opened lid of his daughter, he winked rapidly, and blushed to the roots of his hair.

"Yes, Jack was there," said Jenny, without change of color, or the least self-consciousness in her great gray eyes; "and he came home with me." She paused a moment, locking her two hands under her head, and assuming a more comfortable position on the pillow. "He asked me that same question again, father, and I said, 'Yes.' It's to be--soon. We're going to live at Four Forks, in his own house; and next winter we're going to Sacramento. I suppose it's all right, father, eh?" She emphasized the question with a slight kick through the bed-clothes, as the parental McClosky had fallen into an abstract reverie.

"Yes, surely," said Mr. McClosky, recovering himself with some confusion. After a pause, he looked down at the bed-clothes, and, patting them tenderly, continued,

"You couldn't have done better, Jinny. They isn't a girl in Tuolumne ez could strike it ez rich as you hev--even if they got the chance." He paused again, and then said, "Jinny?"

"Yes, father."

"You'se in bed, and ondressed?"

"Yes."

"You couldn't," said Mr. McClosky, glancing hopelessly at the two chairs, and slowly rubbing his chin,--"you couldn't dress yourself again could yer?"

"Why, father!"

"Kinder get yourself into them things again?" he added hastily. "Not all of 'em, you know, but some of 'em. Not if I helped you-- sorter stood by, and lent a hand now and then with a strap, or a buckle, or a necktie, or a shoestring?" he continued, still looking at the chairs, and evidently trying to boldly familiarize himself with their contents.

"Are you crazy, father?" demanded Jenny suddenly sitting up with a portentous switch of her yellow mane. Mr. McClosky rubbed one side of his beard, which already had the appearance of having been quite worn away by that process, and faintly dodged the question.

"Jinny," he said, tenderly stroking the bedclothes as he spoke, "this yer's what's the matter. Thar is a stranger down stairs,--a stranger to you, lovey, but a man ez I've knowed a long time. He's been here about an hour; and he'll be here ontill fower o'clock, when the up-stage passes. Now I wants ye, Jinny dear, to get up and come down stairs, and kinder help me pass the time with him. It's no use, Jinny," he went on, gently raising his hand to deprecate any interruption, "it's no use! He won't go to bed; he won't play keerds; whiskey don't take no effect on him. Ever since I knowed him, he was the most onsatisfactory critter to hev round"--

"What do you have him round for, then?" interrupted Miss Jinny sharply.

Mr. McClosky's eyes fell. "Ef he hedn't kem out of his way to- night to do me a good turn, I wouldn't ask ye, Jinny. I wouldn't, so help me! But I thought, ez I couldn't do any thing with him, you might come down, and sorter fetch him, Jinny, as you did the others."

Miss Jenny shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"Is he old, or young?"

"He's young enough, Jinny; but he knows a power of things."

"What does he do?"

"Not much, I reckon. He's got money in the mill at Four Forks. He travels round a good deal. I've heard, Jinny that he's a poet-- writes them rhymes, you know." Mr. McClosky here appealed submissively but directly to his daughter. He remembered that she had frequently been in receipt of printed elegaic couplets known as "mottoes," containing enclosures equally saccharine.

Miss Jenny slightly curled her pretty lip. She had that fine contempt for the illusions of fancy which belongs to the perfectly healthy young animal.

"Not," continued Mr. McClosky, rubbing his head reflectively, "not ez I'd advise ye, Jinny, to say any thing to him about poetry. It ain't twenty minutes ago ez I did. I set the whiskey afore him in the parlor. I wound up the music-box, and set it goin'. Then I sez to him, sociable-like and free, 'Jest consider yourself in your own house, and repeat what you allow to be your finest production,' and he raged. That man, Jinny, jest raged! Thar's no end of the names he called me. You see, Jinny," continued Mr. McClosky apologetically, "he's known me a long time."

But his daughter had already dismissed the question with her usual directness. "I'll be down in a few moments, father," she said after a pause, "but don't say any thing to him about it--don't say I was abed."

Mr. McClosky's face beamed. "You was allers a good girl, Jinny," he said, dropping on one knee the better to imprint a respectful kiss on her forehead. But Jenny caught him by the wrists, and for a moment held him captive. "Father," said she, trying to fix his shy eyes with the clear, steady glance of her own, "all the girls that were there to-night had some one with them. Mame Robinson had her aunt; Lucy Rance had her mother; Kate Pierson had her sister-- all, except me, had some other woman. Father dear," her lip trembled just a little, "I wish mother hadn't died when I was so small. I wish there was some other woman in the family besides me. I ain't lonely with you, father dear; but if there was only some one, you know, when the time comes for John and me"--

Her voice here suddenly gave out, but not her brave eyes, that were still fixed earnestly upon his face. Mr. McClosky, apparently tracing out a pattern on the bedquilt, essayed words of comfort.

"Thar ain't one of them gals ez you've named, Jinny, ez could do what you've done with a whole Noah's ark of relations, at their backs! Thar ain't 'one ez wouldn't sacrifice her nearest relation to make the strike that you hev. Ez to mothers, maybe, my dear you're doin' better without one." He rose suddenly, and walked toward the door. When he reached it, he turned, and, in his old

deprecating manner, said, "Don't be long, Jinny," smiled, and vanished from the head downward, his canvas slippers asserting themselves resolutely to the last.

When Mr. McClosky reached his parlor again, his troublesome guest was not there. The decanter stood on the table untouched; three or four books lay upon the floor; a number of photographic views of the Sierras were scattered over the sofa; two sofa-pillows, a newspaper, and a Mexican blanket, lay on the carpet, as if the late occupant of the room had tried to read in a recumbent position. A French window opening upon a veranda, which never before in the history of the house had been unfastened, now betrayed by its waving lace curtain the way that the fugitive had escaped. Mr. McClosky heaved a sigh of despair. He looked at the gorgeous carpet purchased in Sacramento at a fabulous price, at the crimson satin and rosewood furniture unparalleled in the history of Tuolumne, at the massively-framed pictures on the walls, and looked beyond it, through the open window, to the reckless man, who, fleeing these sybaritic allurements, was smoking a cigar upon the moonlit road. This room, which had so often awed the youth of Tuolumne into filial respect, was evidently a failure. It remained to be seen if the "Rose" herself had lost her fragrance. "I reckon Jinny will fetch him yet," said Mr. McClosky with parental faith.

He stepped from the window upon the veranda; but he had scarcely done this, before his figure was detected by the stranger, who at once crossed the road. When within a few feet of McClosky, he stopped. "You persistent old plantigrade!" he said in a low voice, audible only to the person addressed, and a face full of affected anxiety, "why don't you go to bed? Didn't I tell you to go and leave me here alone? In the name of all that's idiotic and imbecile, why do you continue to shuffle about here? Or are you trying to drive me crazy with your presence, as you have with that wretched music-box that I've just dropped under yonder tree? It's an hour and a half yet before the stage passes: do you think, do you imagine for a single moment, that I can tolerate you until then, eh? Why don't you speak? Are you asleep? You don't mean to say that you have the audacity to add somnambulism to your other weaknesses? you're not low enough to repeat yourself under any such weak pretext as that, eh?"

A fit of nervous coughing ended this extraordinary exordium; and half sitting, half leaning against the veranda, Mr. McClosky's guest turned his face, and part of a slight elegant figure, toward his host. The lower portion of this upturned face wore an habitual expression of fastidious discontent, with an occasional line of physical suffering. But the brow above was frank and critical; and a pair of dark, mirthful eyes, sat in playful judgment over the super-sensitive mouth and its suggestion.

"I allowed to go to bed, Ridgeway," said Mr. McClosky meekly; "but my girl Jinny's jist got back from a little tear up at Robinson's, and ain't inclined to turn in yet. You know what girls is. So I thought we three would jist have a social chat together to pass away the time."

"You mendacious old hypocrite! She got back an hour ago," said Ridgeway, "as that savage-looking escort of hers, who has been haunting the house ever since, can testify. My belief is, that, like an enterprising idiot as you are, you've dragged that girl out of her bed, that we might mutually bore each other."

Mr. McClosky was too much stunned by this evidence of Ridgeway's apparently superhuman penetration to reply. After enjoying his host's confusion for a moment with his eyes, Ridgeway's mouth asked grimly,--

"And who is this girl, anyway?"

"Nancy's."

"Your wife's?"

"Yes. But look yar, Ridgeway," said McClosky, laying one hand imploringly on Ridgeway's sleeve, "not a word about her to Jinny. She thinks her mother's dead--died in Missouri. Eh!"

Ridgeway nearly rolled from the veranda in an excess of rage. "Good God! Do you mean to say that you have been concealing from her a fact that any day, any moment, may come to her ears? That you've been letting her grow up in ignorance of something that by this time she might have outgrown and forgotten? That you have been, like a besotted old ass, all these years slowly forging a thunderbolt that any one may crush her with? That"--but here Ridgeway's cough took possession of his voice, and even put a moisture into his dark eyes, as he looked at McClosky's aimless hand feebly employed upon his beard.

"But," said McClosky, "look how she's done! She's held her head as high as any of 'em. She's to be married in a month to the richest man in the county; and," he added cunningly, "Jack Ashe ain't the kind o' man to sit by and hear any thing said of his wife or her relations, you bet! But hush--that's her foot on the stairs. She's cummin'."

She came. I don't think the French window ever held a finer view than when she put aside the curtains, and stepped out. She had dressed herself simply and hurriedly, but with a woman's knowledge of her best points; so that you got the long curves of her shapely limbs, the shorter curves of her round waist and shoulders, the long sweep of her yellow braids, the light of her gray eyes, and even the delicate rose of her complexion, without knowing how it was delivered to you.

The introduction by Mr. McClosky was brief. When Ridgeway had got over the fact that it was two o'clock in the morning, and that the cheek of this Tuolumne

goddess nearest him was as dewy and fresh as an infant's, that she looked like Marguerite, without, probably, ever having heard of Goethe's heroine, he talked, I dare say, very sensibly. When Miss Jenny--who from her childhood had been brought up among the sons of Anak, and who was accustomed to have the supremacy of our noble sex presented to her as a physical fact-- found herself in the presence of a new and strange power in the slight and elegant figure beside her, she was at first frightened and cold. But finding that this power, against which the weapons of her own physical charms were of no avail, was a kindly one, albeit general, she fell to worshipping it, after the fashion of woman, and casting before it the fetishes and other idols of her youth. She even confessed to it. So that, in half an hour, Ridgeway was in possession of all the facts connected with her life, and a great many, I fear, of her fancies--except one. When Mr. McClosky found the young people thus amicably disposed, he calmly went to sleep.

It was a pleasant time to each. To Miss Jenny it had the charm of novelty; and she abandoned herself to it, for that reason, much more freely and innocently than her companion, who knew something more of the inevitable logic of the position. I do not think, however, he had any intention of love-making. I do not think he was at all conscious of being in the attitude. I am quite positive he would have shrunk from the suggestion of disloyalty to the one woman whom he admitted to himself he loved. But, like most poets, he was much more true to an idea than a fact, and having a very lofty conception of womanhood, with a very sanguine nature, he saw in each new face the possibilities of a realization of his ideal. It was, perhaps, an unfortunate thing for the women, particularly as he brought to each trial a surprising freshness, which was very deceptive, and quite distinct from the 'blase' familiarity of the man of gallantry. It was this perennial virginity of the affections that most endeared him to the best women, who were prone to exercise toward him a chivalrous protection,--as of one likely to go astray, unless looked after,--and indulged in the dangerous combination of sentiment with the highest maternal instincts. It was this quality which caused Jenny to recognize in him a certain boyishness that required her womanly care, and even induced her to offer to accompany him to the cross-roads when the time for his departure arrived. With her superior knowledge of woodcraft and the locality, she would have kept him from being lost. I wot not but that she would have protected him from bears or wolves, but chiefly, I think, from the feline fascinations of Mame Robinson and Lucy Rance, who might be lying in wait for this tender young poet. Nor did she cease to be thankful that Providence had, so to speak, delivered him as a trust into her hands.

It was a lovely night. The moon swung low, and languished softly on the snowy ridge beyond. There were quaint odors in the still air; and a strange incense from the woods perfumed their young blood, and seemed to swoon in their pulses. Small wonder that they lingered on the white road, that their feet climbed, unwillingly the little hill where they were to part, and that, when they at last reached it, even the saving grace of speech seemed to have forsaken them.

For there they stood alone. There was no sound nor motion in earth, or woods, or heaven. They might have been the one man and woman for whom this goodly earth that lay at their feet, rimmed with the deepest azure, was created. And, seeing this, they turned toward each other with a sudden instinct, and their hands met, and then their lips in one long kiss.

And then out of the mysterious distance came the sound of voices, and the sharp clatter of hoofs and wheels, and Jenny slid away--a white moonbeam--from the hill. For a moment she glimmered through the trees, and then, reaching the house, passed her sleeping father on the veranda, and, darting into her bedroom, locked the door, threw open the window, and, falling on her knees beside it, leaned her hot cheeks upon her hands, and listened. In a few moments she was rewarded by the sharp clatter of hoofs on the stony road; but it was only a horseman, whose dark figure was swiftly lost in the shadows of the lower road. At another time she might have recognized the man; but her eyes and ears were now all intent on something else. It came presently with dancing lights, a musical rattle of harness, a cadence of hoof-beats, that set her heart to beating in unison--and was gone. A sudden sense of loneliness came over her; and tears gathered in her sweet eyes.

She arose, and looked around her. There was the little bed, the dressing-table, the roses that she had worn last night, still fresh and blooming in the little vase. Every thing was there; but every thing looked strange. The roses should have been withered, for the party seemed so long ago. She could hardly remember when she had worn this dress that lay upon the chair. So she came back to the window, and sank down beside it, with her cheek a trifle paler, leaning on her hand, and her long braids reaching to the floor. The stars paled slowly, like her cheek; yet with eyes that saw not, she still looked from her window for the coming dawn.

It came, with violet deepening into purple, with purple flushing into rose, with rose shining into silver, and glowing into gold. The straggling line of black picket-fence below, that had faded away with the stars, came back with the sun. What was that object moving by the fence? Jenny raised her head, and looked intently. It was a man endeavoring to climb the pickets, and falling backward with each attempt. Suddenly she started to her feet, as if the rosy flushes of the dawn had crimsoned her from forehead to shoulders; then she stood, white as the wall, with her hands clasped upon her bosom; then, with a single bound, she reached the door, and, with flying braids and fluttering skirt, sprang down the stairs, and out to the garden walk. When within a few feet of the fence, she uttered a cry, the first she had given,--the cry of a mother over her stricken babe, of a tigress over her mangled cub; and in another moment she had leaped the fence, and knelt beside Ridgeway, with his fainting head upon her breast.

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