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Old Rose and Silver

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OLD ROSE AND SILVER

BY MYRTLE REED

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I

A FALLING STAR

[Illustration: Musical Notation]

The last hushed chord died into silence, but the woman lingered, dreaming over the keys. Firelight from the end of the room brought red- gold gleams into the dusky softness of her hair and shadowed her profile upon the opposite wall. No answering flash of jewels met the questioning light—there was only a mellow glow from the necklace of tourmalines, quaintly set, that lay upon the white lace of her gown.

She turned her face toward the fire as a flower seeks the sun, but her deep eyes looked beyond it, into the fires of Life itself. A haunting sense of unfulfilment stirred her to vague resentment, and she sighed as she rose and moved restlessly about the room. She lighted the tall candles that stood upon the mantel-shelf, straightened a rug, moved a chair, and gathered up a handful of fallen rose-petals on her way to the window. She was about to draw down the shade, but, instead, her hand dropped slowly to her side, her fingers unclasped, and the crushed crimson petals fluttered to the floor.

Outside, the purple dusk of Winter twilight lay soft upon the snow. Through an opening in the evergreens the far horizon, grey as mother-of-pearl, bent down to touch the plain in a misty line that was definite yet not clear. At the left were the mountains, cold and calm, veiled by distances dim with frost.

There was a step upon the stair, but the strong, straight figure in white lace did not turn away from the window, even when the door opened. The stillness was broken only by the cheerful crackle of the fire until a sweet voice asked:

"Are you dreaming, Rose?"

Rose turned away from the window then, with a laugh. "Why, I must have been. Will you have this chair, Aunt Francesca?"

She turned a high-backed rocker toward the fire and Madame Bernard leaned back luxuriously, stretching her tiny feet to the blaze. She wore grey satin slippers with high French heels and silver buckles. A bit of grey silk stocking was visible between the buckle and the hem of her grey gown.

Rose smiled at her in affectionate appreciation. The little old lady seemed like a bit of Dresden china; she was so dainty and so frail. Her hair was lustreless, snowy white, and beautifully, though simply, dressed in a bygone fashion. Her blue eyes were so deep in colour as to seem almost purple in certain lights, and the years had been kind to her, leaving few lines. Her hands, resting on the arms of her chair, had not lost their youthful contour, but around her eyes and the corners of her mouth were the faint prints of many smiles.

"Rose," said Madame Bernard, suddenly, "you are very lovely to-night."

"I was thinking the same of you," responded the younger woman, flushing.

"Shall we organise ourselves into a mutual admiration society?"

"We might as well, I think. There seems to be nobody else."

A shadow crossed Rose's face and her beauty took on an appealing wistfulness. She had been sheltered always and she hungered for Life as the sheltered often do. Madame Bernard, for the thousandth time, looked at her curiously. From the shapely foot that tapped restlessly on the rug beneath her white lace gown, to the crown of dusky hair with red-gold lights in it, Rose was made for love—and Madame wondered how she had happened to miss it.

"Aunt Francesca," said Rose, with a whimsical sadness, "do you realise that I'm forty to-day?"

"That's nothing," returned the other, serenely. "Everybody has been forty, or will be, if they live."

"I haven't lived yet," Rose objected. "I've only been alive."

"While there's life there's hope," quoted Madame lightly. "What do you want, dear child? Battle, murder, and sudden death?"

"I don't know what I want."

"Let's take an inventory and see if we can find out. You have one priceless blessing—good health. You have considerably more than your share of good looks. Likewise a suitable wardrobe; not many clothes, but few, and those few, good. Clothes are supposed to please and satisfy women. You have musical talent, a love of books and flowers, a fine appreciation of beauty, a host of friends, and that one supreme gift of the gods—a sense of humour. In addition to all this, you have a comfortable home and an income of your own that enables you to do practically as you please. Could you ask for more?"

"Not while I have you, Aunt Francesca. I suppose I'm horrid."

"You couldn't be, my dear. I've left marriage out of the question, since, if you'd had any deep longing for it, you'd have chosen some one from the horde that has infested my house for fifteen years and more. You've surely been loved."

Rose smiled and bit her lip. "I think that's it," she murmured. "I've never cared for anybody—like that. At least, I don't think I have."

"When in doubt, don't," resumed the other, taking refuge in a platitude. "Is there any one of that faithful procession whom you particularly regret?"

"No," answered Rose, truthfully.

"Love is like a vaccination," continued the little lady in grey, with seeming irrelevance. "When it takes, you don't have to be told."

Her tone was light, almost flippant, and Rose, in her turn, wondered at the woman and her marvellous self-control. At twenty-five, Madame Bernard married a young French soldier, who had chosen to serve his adopted country in the War of the Rebellion. In less than three months, her gallant Captain was brought home to her—dead.

For a long time, she hovered uncertainly between life and death. Then, one day, she sat up and asked for a mirror. The ghost of her former self looked back at her, for her colour was gone, her hair was quickly turning grey, and the light had vanished from her eyes. Yet

the valiant spirit was not broken, and that day, with high resolve, she sent her soul forward upon the new way.

"He was a soldier," she said, "and I, his wife, will be a soldier too. He faced Death bravely and I shall meet Life with as much courage as God will give me. But do not, oh, do not even speak his name to me, or I shall forget I am a soldier and become a woman again."

So, gradually, it became understood that the young soldier's name was not to be mentioned to his widow. She took up her burden and went on, devoting herself to the army service until the war was over. Then she ceased to labour with lint and bandages and betook herself to new surroundings. Her husband's brother offered her a home, but she was unable to accept, for the two men looked so much alike that she could not have borne it. Sometimes, even now, she turned away in pain from Rose, who resembled her father.

"Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief," Madame Bernard was saying. "I seem to run to conversational antiques tonight. 'Doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief—' which will you have, Rose? If I remember rightly, you've had all but the thief already. Shall I get you a nice embezzler, or will a plain burglar do?"

"Neither," laughed Rose. "I'm safe from embezzlers, I think, but I live in nightly fear of being burgled, as you well know."

"None the less, we've got to take the risk. Isabel will not be contented with you and me. She'll want other hats on the rack besides the prehistoric relic we keep there as a warning to burglars."

"I'd forgotten Isabel," answered Rose, with a start. "What is she doing?"

"Dressing for dinner. My dear, that child brought three trunks with her and I understand another is coming. She has enough clothes to set up a modest shop, should she desire to 'go into trade' as the English say."

"I'd forgotten Isabel," said Rose, again. "We must find some cal-low youths to amuse her. A girl of twenty can't appreciate a real man."

"Sometimes a girl of forty can't, either," laughed Madame, with a sly glance at Rose. "Cheer up, my dear—I'm nearing seventy, and I assure you that forty is really very young."

"It's scarcely infantile, but I'll admit that I'm young—comparatively."

"All things are comparative in this world, and perhaps you and Isabel, with your attendant swains, may enable me to forget that I'm no longer young, even comparatively."

The guest came in, somewhat shyly. She was a cousin of Rose's, on the mother's side, and had arrived only that afternoon on a visit.

"Bless us," said Madame Bernard; "how pretty we are! Isabel, you're a credit to the establishment."

Isabel smiled—a little, cool smile. She was almost as tall as Rose and towered far above the little lady in grey who offered her a welcoming hand and invited her to sit by the fire. Isabel's gown was turquoise blue and very becoming, as her hair and eyes were dark and her skin was fair. Her eyes were almost black and very brilliant; they literally sparkled when she allowed herself to become interested in anything.

"I'm not late, am I?" she asked.

"No," answered Rose, glancing at the clock. "It's ten minutes to seven."

"I couldn't find my things. It was like dressing in a dream, when, as soon as you find something you want, you immediately lose everything else."

"I know," laughed Rose. "I had occasion to pack a suit-case myself last night, during my troubled slumbers."

A large yellow cat appeared mysteriously out of the shadows and came, yawning, toward the fire. He sat down on the edge of Madame's grey gown, and blinked.

Isabel drew her skirts away. "I don't like cats," she said.

"There are cats and cats," remarked Madame Bernard in a tone of gentle rebuke. "Mr. Boffin is not an ordinary cat. He is a gentleman and a scholar and he never forgets his manners."

"I've wondered, sometimes," said Rose, "whether he really knows everything, or only pretends that he does. He looks very wise."

"Silence and reserve will give anyone a reputation for wisdom,"

Madame

responded. She bent down to stroke the yellow head, but, though Mr.

Boffin gratefully accepted the caress, he did not condescend to purr. Presently he stalked away into the shadows, waving his yellow tail.

"What a lovely room this is," observed Isabel, after a pause.

"It's comfortable," replied Madame. "I couldn't live in an ugly place."

Everything in the room spoke eloquently of good taste, from the deep-toned Eastern rug at the hearth to the pictures upon the grey-green walls. There was not a false note anywhere in the subtle harmony of line, colour, and fabric. It was the sort of room that one comes back to, after long absence, with renewed appreciation.

"I love old mahogany," continued Isabel. "I suppose you've had this a long, long time."

"No, it's new. To me—I mean. I have some beautiful old French mahogany, but I don't use it."

Her voice was very low at the end of the sentence. She compressed her lips tightly and, leaning forward, vigorously poked the fire. A stream of sparks went up the chimney and quick flames leaped to follow.

"Don't set the house on fire, Aunt Francesca," cautioned Rose. "There's the dinner gong."

The three went out, Madame Bernard a little ahead and the two younger women together. Rose sat opposite the head of the table and Isabel was placed at Madame's right. In a single glance, the guest noted that the table was perfectly appointed. "Are you making company of me?" she asked.

"Not at all," smiled Madame. "None the less, there is a clear distinction between eating and dining and we endeavour to dine."

"If Aunt Francesca were on a desert island," said Rose, "I believe she would make a grand affair of her solitary dinner, and have her coffee in the morning before she rolled out of the sand."

The little old lady dimpled with pleasure. "I'd try to," she laughed. "I think I'd—"

She was interrupted by a little exclamation of pleasure from Rose, who had just discovered a small white parcel at her plate. She was untying it with eager fingers, while her colour came and went. A card fluttered out, face upward. "To my dear Rose, with love from Aunt Francesca," was written in a small, quaint hand.

It was a single magnificent ruby set in a ring which exactly fitted. Rose seldom wore rings and wondered, vaguely, how Aunt Francesca knew.

"I filled a finger of one of your gloves," said Madame, as though she had read the thought, "and had it fitted. Simple, wasn't it?"

"Oh," breathed Rose, "it's beautiful beyond words! How shall I ever thank you!"

"Wear it, dear. I'm so glad you're pleased!"

"It's lovely," said Isabel, but the tone was cold and she seemed to speak with an effort. With a swift little stab at the heart, Rose saw that the girl envied her the gift.

"It reconciles me to my years," Rose went on, quickly. "I'm willing to be forty, if I can have a ring like this."

"Why, Cousin Rose!" cried Isabel, in astonishment. "Are you forty?"

"Yes, dear. Don't be conventional and tell me I don't look it, for I feel it—every year."

"I should never have thought it," Isabel murmured.

Rose turned the ring slowly upon her finger and the ruby yielded the deep crimson glow of its heart to the candlelight that softly filled the room. "I've never had a ruby," she said, "and yet I feel, somehow, as though I'd always had this. It seems as if it belonged to me."

"That's because it suits you," nodded Madame Bernard. "I hope that sometime our civilisation may reach such a point of advancement that every woman will wear the clothes and jewels that suit her personality, and make her home a proper setting for herself. See how women break their hearts for diamonds—and not one woman in a hundred can wear them."

"Could I wear diamonds?" asked Isabel. She was interested now and her eyes sparkled.

Madame Bernard studied her for a moment before replying. "Yes," she admitted, "you could wear them beautifully, but they do not belong to Rose, or to me."

"What else could I wear?"

"Turquoises, if they were set in silver."

"I have one," Isabel announced with satisfaction. "A lovely big turquoise matrix set in dull silver. But I have no diamonds."

"They'll come," Rose assured her, "if you want them. I think people usually get things if they want them badly enough."

Isabel turned to Madame Bernard. "What stones do you wear?" she inquired, politely.

"Only amethysts," she laughed. "I have a pearl necklace, but it doesn't quite 'belong,' so I don't wear it. I won't wear anything that doesn't 'belong.'"

"How can you tell?"

"By instinct." "I can walk into a shop, look around for a moment, and say: 'please bring me my hat.' The one I ask for is always the right one. It is invariably becoming and suitable, and it's the same with everything else."

"It's a wonderful experience to go shopping with Aunt Francesca," put in Rose. "She knows what she wants and goes straight to it, without loss of time. Utterly regardless of fashion, for its own sake, she always contrives to be in the mode, though I believe that if hoop skirts were suited to her, she'd have the courage of her crinoline, and wear one."

"Let us be thankful they're not," remarked Madame. "It's almost impossible to believe it, but they must have looked well upon some women. Every personality makes its own demand for harmony and it is fascinating to me to observe strange people and plan for them their houses and clothes and belongings. You can pick out, from a crowd, the woman who would have a crayon portrait of herself upon an easel in her parlour, and quite properly, too, since her nature demands it. After you are experienced, you can identify the man who eats sugar and vinegar on lettuce, and group those who keep parrots—or are capable of it."

The seventy years sat lightly upon Madame Francesca now. Her deep eyes shone with inward amusement, and little smiles hovered unexpectedly about the corners of her mouth. A faint pink tint, like a faded rose, bloomed upon her cheeks. Rose watched her with adoring eyes, and wondered whether any man in the world, after fifteen years of close association, could be half so delightful.

Coffee was brought into the living-room, when they went back, preceded by Mr. Boffin, emanating the dignified satisfaction of a cat who has supped daintily upon chicken and cream. He sat down before the fire and methodically washed his face.

"I believe I envy Mr. Boffin his perfect digestion," remarked Madame, as she sipped her coffee from a Royal Canton cup. She and Rose stood for half an hour after dinner, always.

Isabel finished her coffee and set the cup upon the table. She slipped the Sheffield tray from under the embroidered doily and took it to the light, where she leaned over it, studying the design. Rose thought that the light from the tray was reflected upon the girl's face, she became at once so brilliant, so sparkling.

"Speaking of harmony—" said Madame Bernard, in a low tone, glancing at Rose and inclining her head toward Isabel.

"Yes," replied Isabel, returning the tray to its place; "it is a lovely one, isn't it?"

Madame turned toward the window to hide a smile. Rose followed, and drew the little grey lady into the circle of her strong arm.

"Dear Aunt Francesca!" she said softly. "I thank you so much!"

The older woman patted the hand that wore the ruby, then turned to Isabel. "Come," she said, "and be glad you're indoors."

The three women stood at the wide window, looking out across the snow, lighted only by the stars and a ghostly crescent of moon. The evergreens were huddled closely together as though they kept each other warm. Beyond, the mountains brooded in their eternal sleep, which riving lightnings and vast, reverberating thunders were powerless to change.

Suddenly, across the purple darkness between the pale stars, flamed a meteor—an uncharted voyager through infinite seas of space. It left a trail of fire across the heavens, fading at last into luminous mist, the colour of the stars. When the light had quite died out, Madame Bernard spoke.

"A passing soul," she sighed.

"A kiss," breathed Rose, dreamily.

"Star-dust!" laughed Isabel.

II

WELCOME HOME

"Great news, my dears, great news!" cried Madame Bernard, gaily waving an open letter as she came into the room where Rose was sewing and Isabel experimenting with a new coiffure. "I'll give you three guesses!"

"Somebody coming for a visit?" asked Isabel.

"Wrong!"

"Somebody coming, but not for a visit?" queried Rose.

"You're getting warmer."

"How can anybody come, if not for a visit?" inquired Isabel, mildly perplexed. "That is, unless it's a messenger?"

"The old Kent house is to be opened," said Madame, "and we're to open it. At last we shall have neighbours!"

"How exciting," Rose answered. She did not wholly share the old lady's pleasure, and wondered with a guilty consciousness of the long hours she spent at her music, whether Aunt Francesca had been lonely.

"Listen, girls!" Madame's cheeks were pink with excitement as she sat down with the letter, which had been written in Paris.

"MY DEAR MADAME FRANCESCA:

"At last we are coming home — Allison and I. The boy has a fancy to see Spring come again on his native heath, so we shall sail earlier than we had otherwise planned.

"I wonder, my dear friend, if I dare ask you to open the house for us? I am so tired of hotels that I want to go straight back. You have the keys and if you will engage the proper number of servants and

see that the place is made habitable, I shall be more than ever your debtor. I will cable you when we start.

"Trusting that all is well with you and yours and with many thanks, believe me, my dear Madame,

"Most faithfully yours,

"RICHARD KENT."

"How like a man," smiled Rose. "That house has been closed for over ten years, and he thinks there is nothing to be done but to unlock the front door and engage two or three servants who may or may not be trustworthy."

"What an imposition!" Isabel said. "Aunt Francesca, didn't I meet Allison Kent when I was here before?"

"I've forgotten."

"Don't you remember? Mother brought me here once when I was a little tot. We stayed about a week and the roses were all in bloom. I can see the garden now. Allison used to come over sometimes and tell me fairy stories. He told me that the long, slender gold-trimmed bottles filled with attar of roses came from the roots of the rose bushes—don't you remember? And I pulled up rose bushes all over the garden to find out."

"Dear me, yes," smiled Aunt Francesca. "How time does fly!"

"You were very cross with Allison—that is, as cross as you ever could be. It seemed so queer for you to be angry at him and not at me, for I pulled up the bushes."

"You were sufficiently punished, Isabel. I believe the thorns hurt your little hands, didn't they?"

"They certainly did," responded the girl, with a little shudder at the recollection. "I have a scar still. That was—let me see—why, it was fifteen years ago!"

"Just before I came to live with Aunt Francesca," said Rose. "You and your mother went away the same day."