



## THE ROSE AND THE ROGUE.

BY FREDERICK FLUKE.

**Q**UITE abruptly I pushed my pistol through the opened window of the great coach. There was a moment of silence and then a soft, startled cry. And because it amused me—because it came so utterly unexpected, I laughed!

The frightened driver upon the high seat sat stone-like, his eyes bulging, his face pasty, and his very limbs rigid and nerveless. The two horses, in jingling, glittering harness, gleaming in the sun, stamped impatiently at the delay. With one boot upon the step I continued to hold the pistol threateningly through the window.

“Good morrow!” I said, amiably and in my softest manner—for oft is my voice rough and unpleasant—but today, like Master Shakespeare’s comedian, I roared lightly.

“Good morrow!” I repeated when naught

answered me from the interior. There came a moment of pregnant suspense, then a slight rustle of many silken skirts. The door was thrown back, and there stepped down from out the coach a wondrous vision of a maid—and with never a trace of fear showing in her soft, brown eyes.

Instantly I bared my head and hastily clapped the pistol back to my belt.

“You are a most venturesome rogue,” she said quite calmly, while the color heightened in her oval cheeks. “If you have business with me, sir, pray hasten; already am I overdue at my destination.”

“A thousand pardons, mistress,” I implored valiantly, and with a great sweep of my feathered hat. “I have waited since daybreak for you; since daybreak, mind you, and it was none too warm.”

“To business, Master Rogue,” she

interrupted, with an impatient toss of her head.

"Aye!" I resumed, reddening behind my mask. "You have about your person, one hundred guineas. You will not offer to keep them from me. Consider—I have waited and shivered in the early dawn. I hope you have them conveniently tied."

The color fled from her cheeks as a wind-driven cloud. I noted that her red lips set themselves determinedly; yet she did not hesitate, but with a quick move reached back a white, tapering arm and gathered from beneath the seat a heavy, clinking bag which she tossed to my feet.

"And now—now I pray you let me proceed," she broke out.

"A moment, mistress," I begged, smiling and weighing reflectively the heavy bag within both my hands. "There is another—er—slight—very slight matter. The rings upon your fingers—they are particularly dazzling and attractive; I am minded to make them into a sword-hilt—and that necklace about your throat; such pearls are rare indeed, nowadays, in England."

Silently she stripped her slim, white fingers of the rings, with never a sob or entreaty. When it came to the necklace she struggled vainly upon the fastening, and the color again surged high to her cheeks from the exertion. With a soft, murmured apology I stepped nearer and with a deft finger unhooked the string, touching for the instant the soft warmth of her neck, at which my very fingers tingled and my pulse bounded as madly as a frightened hare.

"And—now—now, sir, may I proceed?" she asked faintly, almost inaudibly; and even as she spoke she swayed sharply and would have fallen had she not gripped at the coach door.

I was minded to note the picture as she wavered thus, tremulous and white and pitifully brave. Her thick brown hair had fallen soft about the oval of her cheeks; her lips, almost colorless, parted slightly, disclosed the twin, even rows of tiny, rice-like teeth; and the sensitive nostrils of her straight, well-cut nose pulsated abruptly at each in-taking of breath. Never before had I beheld such a wondrous picture.

"I have naught more to ask of you, mistress," I returned after a pause; and I spoke gently, for, in truth, I felt a bit of tenderness

toward my fair victim. "I am well paid for my wait. If I might assist you"—and, without waiting permission, I stepped near, placing a hand beneath her arm. She slipped silently to her beflowered pillows that were banked within the coach.

"A strange rogue, surely," she faltered, with a trace of a smile about her white lips. "You are more of a gentleman than I took you to be."

I flushed beneath my mask and lowered my eyes to her tiny, beslippered feet that peeped so bewitchingly from under the mass of skirts.

"Strange, indeed," she furthered, piquant, "that a rogue should blush at a lady's word. Your mask is all too small to screen it."

"Which shows the best of my breeding," I made slow and deliberate answer. She raised her narrow, arched brows.

"I regret, then," she said, simply, "that I have seen the—worst, also."

"But a man must live," I faltered, still watching the buckles flash upon her silk slippers.

She bit slowly at her lips; they reddened beneath the small white teeth. I noted at that instant how distinct her lashes stood out against the white of her skin.

"And yet—yet," she argued, "I have heard of men—who valued a woman's lips greater than—than—a bag of golden guineas."

My heart-throbs quickened and I was conscious of a great singing within my brain.

"You mean——" I faltered huskily.

"Nothing!" she answered quietly. But her eyes did not shift from mine.

"There are men"—she went on, after the pause, plucking at the folds of her gown—"so I have read—who would wager a pearl necklace on—on—the flash of a woman's eyes."

"Even so, mistress," I responded firmly, for the shame burned my face, even to the tips of my ears.

"There are men—but I have yet to meet them—who might give a handful of rings for the glimpse of a trim ankle."

My horse stamped nervously. I scarce could collect my words; the soft perfume from the coach swayed me dizzily, like a youth in the first enchantments of a dance. With an effort I spoke.

"There are men, mistress," I began, "even rogues—who might return a bag of guineas, a

necklace, aye, and even a handful of blazing rings, for a single flower pinned at a woman's breast."

Abruptly her eyes fell from mine and dropped to the rose that lay soft and fragrant against her bosom. Mine followed instinctively; and then, as the sullen red beat up from her bare neck I thrust a hand into my pouch and drew forth the pearls.

Graciously, unbidden, she bent her head and with trembling, burning fingers and choking heart I snapped the necklace about her white throat. The handful of rings I tossed into her lap; the heavy bag of guineas I slipped beneath the seat.

Her big, childlike eyes softened as if a film of tears had swept over them. With eager fingers she unpinned the rose and gave it me. I took it, pressed it passionately to my lips, half bewildered with the perfume; and then as I stepped back she reached out and clicked the door shut. The driver snapped his long whip, and in a moment more the lurching, swaying coach was lost among the heavy screen of trees.

## II.

Near an hour, perhaps, I stood there by the highway, under the great trees at the side of my horse, fingering the long stem of the rose. It was fragrant, newly plucked and most fragile. I slipped it through an eyelet-hole in my frayed doublet and mounted to the saddle.

Hungry I was and weary. I had previously ridden since midnight to reach this point of advantage; and the dawn had proven none too warm for one thinly clad. I had relied upon the guineas for food; but a woman's wiles, so it seemed, had proven far the greater. Perhaps, I concluded almost bitterly, I had been a fool, a weakling, to exchange a bag of guineas, a necklace and a palm full of blazing rings for a scented, short-lived rose. But a man cannot love and be wise at the same time.

I galloped on, unconsciously following the deep ruts left by the broad wheels of the great coach; pondering over the youth and the beauty of its occupant. The sun arose higher and warmed me most graciously. At a forester's I reined my

horse and a lass came to me with a great bowl of foaming milk, which I quaffed eagerly, after which I dropped within the vessel my last bit of silver.

Until noon did I ride; and then with the sun above me I dismounted and threw myself in the cool shade of the trees, lying full upon my back—fanciful—visionary—dreaming.

The purple dusk had fallen, when at last I reached the tavern—the Three Pigeons. The candles blinked alluringly from out the curtained windows; the great door stood invitingly open, beyond which I caught a glimpse of a huge, crackling blaze in the fireplace. The gaunt shadows danced most grotesquely on the walls, even out through the door into the small cobble-paved court.

The clinking of dishes, the laughter and the savory odor of cooking spurred me ahead. Within the dim-lighted court I was helped from the saddle, my faithful beast led away and myself welcomed warmly into the bright, inviting taproom.

Save for myself it contained but a single occupant, for immediately the host had hurried away to bring me a supper. And although I had naught within my pouch to pay for it, I had not the strength to forbid him. This man, who stood silently before the fire, hands clasped at his broad back, eyed me closely as I sat wearily in a chair and removed my hat and gloves.

He was a big man, heavy and ponderous, with hair that was streaked with gray and which hung thick about his shoulders. His cheeks were puffy and bloated and clotted with tiny knots of red veins. When the smiling host came in briskly with the white cloth and the smoking dishes, the stranger withdrew to a far corner and engaged himself in looking through numerous papers.

While I ate and drank, I watched him, not without a feeling akin to interest, for the more I studied, the more familiar his bloated features became. Then his identity flashed over me with a suddenness that caused the mug of ale I held to my lips to spill over my chin and down upon the white linen.

After that—and the man had evidently not perceived my amazement, but continued thumbing his papers—I fell to thinking out his purpose here; for it stood to no small

consequence that the Lord Frederick Dunborne, of the court, should be in this secluded tavern at this time of night and alone.

When I had finished and walked toward the fire, the host came bustling in to remove the dishes. And when he had departed, bearing the tray, I turned as if to make speech with the Lord Frederick—and found him smiling at my elbow.

“Well, Master Robin,” he said, quietly, “what errand brings you here this night, eh?” and he grinned broadly, showing the gold in his big teeth.

“No errand at all, sir,” I made respectful reply.

“No pockets to pick, eh?”

I laughed and flushed. “None at all, sir.”

He motioned me to a chair before the blaze and we fell a-talking.

“You must know, Master Wingfield,” he began easily, his little gray eyes snapping upon me, “that there are certain parties—on the watch for—you. Also that there is a price upon your head,” his eyes twinkled significantly. “But enough of this,” he resumed, with a careless wave of a fat hand. “I have no wish to inconvenience you at all, Master Robin. But I suppose—that you are—er—willing to aid me in a slight matter of—business, which will satisfy both your thirst for adventure as well as substantially line your pouch with the king’s good gold.”

I nodded, but did not venture a reply.

“To-night,” he went on quietly, joining the tips of his fat fingers, “is to be my wedding-night.”

I looked upon him in surprise. “Wedding-night?” I gasped.

“Aye! And I have you in mind, Master Wingfield, for a goodly part.”

I smiled for the first time. “I shall be honored,” I returned briefly; “greatly honored indeed.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” he resumed, sinking his double chin far into the newly starched ruffles of his white waistcoat, as if in perplexity; “but there is another—slight matter. The lady—the Mistress Betty Belford is my ward; a girl of marvelous beauty, Master Robin. I have carefully guarded her from the clamorous advances of the gay young blades of London. Tonight at midnight

she is of age and I, as her guardian, release the reins.”

I nodded dryly and interrupted. “And if I mistake not—this Mistress Betty is possessed of more than mere beauty——”

His Lordship puckered his lips and regarded me reflectively. “Aye—yes; a fortune in lands and money to the amount of—well, twenty thousand guineas And yet”—and he squared himself back in the chair; “yet, after all, my position is a high one, Master Robin. Why should not any maid be pleased to wed with me? I well might have a dozen mistresses in London did I but crook a finger.”

“And the lady——” I asked quietly; “she is willing?”

“Aye. I have kept her away from the court, from the balls and the gay crowds; yet I have fascinated her with the talk of the fair ladies; of the gowns and the jewels and the dashing men. Also have I hinted that when we were married I should promptly take her there. She has heard of naught else; you may well imagine her eagerness for this occurrence.”

“And my part?”

“Yes, yes, I was coming to that. You are to play the priest!”

I stared at him in blank amazement. He smiled and chuckled and raised his head. “In truth, Master Robin, I’ll wager ‘tis the best part you have ever taken, eh?”—and straightway he went off into an outburst of merriment.

“A priest—a priest,” I choked. “Surely you are jesting.”

“Nay, nay; the jest will be on the lady. Remember, I shall reward you—a deal better than you might gain from slitting a pocket.” Then he fell to laughing again, so hard indeed that his fat sides threatened to burst asunder.

“If you will explain?” I managed to make myself heard.

“Yes, yes, of course,” he acquiesced, wiping the tears from his eyes. “Of course, you must understand that under no circumstance am I to truthfully marry this maid—this Mistress Betty. The king would frown upon the match; the court shun me. Why the maid is not even of high birth; and who will say what her manners would be in London. It is a rather desperate measure—but well worth the risk. The cards have been against

me lately; twenty thousand guineas will not come amiss. As I have said, you are to play the priest. I have a costume upstairs, also a prayer-book, marked by a rogue of a churchman near London; you have merely to follow the lines. Is it quite plain, Master Wingfield?"

I nodded, absently, my gaze fixed thoughtfully into the blaze. What a sly fox his lordship was; what a devilish plan to gain a few thousand guineas. I felt rather abashed at first to accept the role he had so obligingly offered me; yet my pouch was empty and a man's stomach is an ill impediment to offend. Therefore, after a moment of due consideration, I consented.

I followed him up the stairs to his room. Once there, and under his watching eye, I quickly donned the black, loose cassock. Then at the sight of me, thus rigged, with prayer-book in one hand and a most melancholy face, his lordship fell to laughing until his face grew red and he sank into a chair from exhaustion.

"Merry!" he burst forth, holding at his shaking sides with both hands, "you are as like a priest as to fool Saint Peter himself. Now go and toast your legs before the fire while I dress."

And so with a word of farewell, promising to meet him in the tap-room, I slipped out the door and walked the length of the rush-carpeted hall in the dim, wavering light of a solitary candle.

At the foot of the stairs, quite unexpectedly I met a lady, ascending. I could not at first discern her face, as the candle-glow did not fall full upon it. But I saw, momentarily, a ring of pearls about a soft, pink and white throat, and with a sharp in-taking of breath I swayed violently against the railing.

At this she looked up, and I saw as I had feared. The maid of my morning's adventure!

She curtsied deep to me with a rosy tint to her lips and cheeks and a burning twinkle to her eyes. I was perplexed at this until I suddenly remembered my costume.

With an oath I tore it from me: the mocking black robe, and stood breathless before her in my own clothes. She fell back a pace at this abrupt occurrence, her fingers fluttering to her eyes and a little choking cry upon her lips.

"Mistress!" I cried, coming forward, now that she was off the stairs. "You do not recognize me."

She searched my face intently, almost eagerly, but no sign of recognition appeared. I scarce expected one, for my mask had well served its purpose.

Then as she was about to speak, her eyes dropped and I saw her start visibly as they fastened themselves upon the wilted rose, still pinned to my doublet. I had forgotten it.

"You—you—the highwayman!" she choked. "I—do not understand!"

I put a warning finger to my lips and glanced fearfully up the stairs. "You will let me explain all," I begged; and mutely she followed me to the fireplace.

"You—are to marry this Lord Frederick Dunborne, your guardian, this night?"

"Aye!" she nodded quickly, with parted, perplexed lips. And then, in my rage, before I was aware I had told the whole plan. I gave her no chance to interrupt; my words stumbled over one another in their eagerness to escape. She listened spellbound, her little hands clenched hard at her sides; her bosom raising and falling in short, convulsive jerks; her breath coming in abrupt, eager gasps from between her white lips. When I had done, with my breath near spent and my face flushed like any schoolboy's, she arose to her feet, swaying perilously near to oblivion. I clapped an arm about her waist, unthinking.

"Mistress Belford," I begged, vehemently, "you cannot, cannot let this trickery be played upon you. If you will trust me—the better part of me—to aid you——"

I felt her body tremble within my arm-hollow.

"If—if you will——" she choked, slipping away from the circle of my arm.

"But I will—I will, I swear. You will trust me?"

"Yes, yes," she went on, distractedly; "but how?"

"To-night after twelve you are your own mistress. Lord Dunborne cannot command you."

Hope leaped boldly to her eyes. "But until then——"

"You must trust me," I returned calmly.

Our eyes met; hers aflame with hope and confidence and expectation.

"I will," she answered firmly. Yet no more had she spoken than a sound was heard above us.

A sound of heavy footfalls to the floor and then the slow, measured tread to the stairs.

Mistress Betty shrank away, her slim hands to her face and fear showing plain within her brown eyes. Even I, steeled to many dangers, felt, momentarily a twinge of misgiving. But the shrinking maid lent me strength; never before had I a woman to protect; never before had I been responsible for so much.

His lordship came slowly down the stairs and finally faced us at the foot. His brow wrinkled at first, then abruptly his whole face blanched as a dead man's, for it was evident he understood everything in a flash. He started to speak, but his lips merely moved convulsively and no sound fell from them.

Calmly I faced him, leaning across the table. Two flickering candles wavered either side of the fireplace; our shadows leaped gaunt and gigantic against the opposite wall.

"Well!" Dunborne finally stammered, "What is the meaning of this, Master Wingfield?"

I smiled grimly with throbbing heart. "The worm turns," I quoted dryly. "Mistress Betty does not desire you for a husband."

His jaw fell; a great line leaped between his brows; his whole face flamed as red as the flowers embroidered upon his, waistcoat.

"What nonsense is this?" he roared, hoarsely.

"None in the least, sir," I responded, quietly. "The clock yonder stands ten minutes of the hour. When that is done the lady is her own mistress."

He turned on me with a great, savage oath, undoubtedly realizing his plot had been frustrated. We glared at one another across the table.

"You seek to meddle in my affairs, Master Wingfield," he snarled. "You seem to forget there is a price upon your head. You make a valiant champion, Master Rogue," and he laughed sneeringly. "No doubt the lady will make a fine bird to pick—eh?"

But he said no more, for with a quick sweep of my opened hand I struck him full across the lips, so that he staggered back, his face as white as the cloth between us. He wasted no further words but his fingers sought his sword-hilt and the next instant, in the pulsating glow of the fire

and the candles, we two, Lord Dunborne and myself, the rogue, were crossing steel.

Merry! How we fought! The table was overturned amid the clatter of broken dishes; and in the spot thus cleared, we dodged and feinted and stepped warily. Although a bulky man, his lordship was most adroit upon his feet and no mean opponent with his steel.

Once, in truth, as I ducked a vicious lunge, my foot caught in a crevice of the tiles and I tottered for the space, my body unguarded; but, suddenly, there was a swish of skirts—an arm about my middle, and Mistress Betty was 'twixt me and his lordship's blade. I met squarely her bright, appealing eyes. I heard, faintly, a curse from Dunborne.

"My champion," she murmured softly. My brain whirled in a perfect ecstasy of joy. I regained my balance with the remembrance of her eyes so near to mine own.

We engaged once more. Another lunge, and Dunborne's point caught in the strappings of my waistcoat. Like a flash over his open guard I whipped my sword, flat side, singing to his face. As it struck, an ugly, red welt glowed sullenly upon the white of his cheek. Nor was this the last, for the blow, thus unexpectedly delivered, stunned him and he whirled about to regain his balance. His foot caught on the table-leg, he tottered, and then crashed heavily to the floor. His head struck full upon the tiles. He lay quiet and unconscious.

Mistress Betty slipped to my side. "You—you have killed him," she whispered, fear-stricken.

"Nay! His head struck upon the tiles. He is merely unconscious and will be well enough in the morning. I shall have him taken upstairs."

The host, white of face, was already in the room, fumbling helplessly with his apron. I quietly gave orders that his lordship be taken to his room and put to bed. Calling in one of the kitchen men they carried the senseless man upstairs.

In the abrupt silence the clock chimed twelve times.

At the dim stair-foot I watched as they ascended. I did not turn, although my heart-beats thickened and my throat felt hot and choking. Then abruptly, softly came a gentle tug upon my

hand, and turning, I met the earnest, childlike eyes of Mistress Betty.

"You—you had best go," I struggled with stammering tongue. "I will watch that none follow. You are now—free."

Her glance fell, like that of a pouting child; she fumbled at the folds of her gown.

"Is it—safe—think you, Master Robin," she ventured; "for a maid—to ride—alone? The road

is dark—and perhaps—a highwayman——"

"Mistress Betty——" I choked, reddening beneath her glance.

"And I—have no more roses——" she furthered, with tremulous lips.

"If you need me——" I began, huskily.

"Master Robin"—her head, all a-clutter with the twisted brown curls stole shyly, timidly to my shoulder; "I do—I do need you."

