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Squaw-Berries

By AGNES G. BROGAN

The brisk walk brought the color tingling to Jane's lately too-pale cheeks; it also loosened a shining strand or two of hair that had grown to a fashion of neat preciseness.

With a strange and sudden impulse she turned from the country roadway down a tree-bordered lane to the ravine. How long it had been since she, a fun-loving girl, had followed this path of wood-fragrant charm, in search of bright red berries, clustering among their shining green leaves in the most underfoot. Or, had the search for squaw-berries been but a youthful excuse for an afternoon in his company? she wondered. So happy, so care-free they had been together, the tall, bright-faced lad, all enthusiasm in planning his future, or "our future" as he had called it, and she, released for an hour or two from the daily care of her invalid mother.

Remembering she would gather the berries from their hiding place beneath the dead leaves, as she listened to that old, old story whose charm is ever new, "And when I come back rich and famous," he would say, "we shall be married, Jane Rose."

"Jane Rose." She loved the name as it fell from his lips. "Jane" was too plain for his "rose-girl," he told her, and the added name seemed a caress. But Jane sighed as she thought of the years of separation, necessary, if he were to become the great artist that his ambition craved. Never for a moment did she doubt his success, even now. Wonderful were his untrained sketches of wood and valley, beautiful fancies, too, filled his mind.

"The dead leaves and the snow," he told her, "signify the discouragements and hardships of life, while beneath them grow the bright berries of hope." "And love," Jane Rose had added timidly, "for love can live through every discouragement." The young man had turned away impatiently at that, for her allegiance to the invalid mother was a never-forgotten grievance. Had it not been for the mother's exacting presence, Jane herself would have traveled with him across the ocean to the land of adventure, and realized ambition. So he had gone away, far as her eye could see his graceful, swinging figure Jane watched him down the road to the station. And that had been more than ten years ago—ten long years and until this threatening winter day, Jane's feet had never again followed the ravine path to the wood.

At first letters had come regularly from her lover; then they had grown further apart, and ceased altogether. Often she thought of him, this absent lover, and without bitterness.

Then came the time when her care was no longer needed. Quite alone, Jane prepared her evening meal and set a place at her table for one. Alone, she sat at evening looking down the long road to the village, for young friends had departed or made newer homes for themselves, while Jane had been "away," occupied with a task of love which allowed no respite.

"I'll go away," Jane murmured passionately, "I will see the world that I have missed. I will not stay forever and ever on a lonely hillside."

As if to give incentive to her decision, Jane read a sentence in the paper which came daily from the city. "Mr. John Allen Gordon," announced the society column, "has returned from abroad." "Mr. John Allen Gordon," she called tremulously. Would he recognize the village friends who still lovingly referred to him as "Jack"? Jane Rose fell to dreaming, then, of the home he might now have, and the wife he might have, and it seemed all at once that the four walls of the little home were pressing down upon her, and she must—must get away.

After that, preparations brought a new and delightful excitement. She would take the money saved from the renting of the old barn for a neighbor's automobile, and spend it all in a short city excursion. Such an extravagance seemed a sin, but this new sense of recklessness was exhilarating. Jane's eyes sparkled with an old light as she viewed the "mail order" traveling suit, with accompanying hat, gloves and shoes. Gray she had chosen for each article, a silvery, beautiful gray.

Jane was enchanted. She blushed with guilty vanity as she regarded herself in the mirror. Ten years, even in the filling of hot-water bottles, had been most kind. Her spirits sank a little as she considered that she had not one acquaintance in the big city. But she knew of the best hotels.

She glanced around the room apprehensively, hoping that the time of luxuriating would not spoil her for the coming back. And as the train rushed cityward she wondered if it could be that two people parted ten years ago might, by any possibility of chance, meet on a public city street.

The arrival at her destination discouraged this hope. Among all the straggling throng, she appeared to be regarded, not even as an individual, but as something to be hastily jostled aside.

Jane sank with a sigh of relief back into the taxi; her head trembled as she signed her name in the hotel register, but the glimmer of her spark brought back the sense of delightful adventure.

"If they could see me now," she said, "these people in Hillcrest." Dinner was a stately affair; to be waited upon so ceremoniously embarrassed her, and she wondered uncomfortably, as she met many a pronounced stare, if anything were wrong with her attire.

After all, why did she wish to see that long-absent one? Was it to satisfy herself once and for all that he really had ceased to care? And then—he came. There was nothing unusual about it if he, a successful artist, were in the city; this hotel would be naturally the place where he would dine. Yet the heart of Jane beat almost to suffocation, and she clasped her hands tightly to control the emotion which surged within her. And, after all, came a vague sense of disappointment. Something was lacking about the man that had been there in the youthful long ago. Was it the bright air of confidence which had pervaded his personality—or what? Jane could not tell. She only knew that his face was white and haggard as from loss of sleep, that his dark eyes burned restlessly.

A sudden light of recognition flamed for a moment in the eyes which directly met hers. Half-smiling, Jane leaned forward, her hand extended in greeting. Then her hand fell limply back upon the table, for he had turned away, deliberately ignoring her presence. Her lips trembled like those of a grief-stricken child as she rose and passed from the room. He had remembered, yet very evidently wished to see her no more. And past all the patient, weary years this fact had power to stab her with a new and poignant pain.

If he were ashamed to acknowledge his old-time friend here, before them all, Jack Gordon had changed. She had still quite a few dollars left—she counted them over regretfully; her spirit of holiday had flown. It was, as she passed down the main street the following morning that Jane came face to face with the picture.

She did not need to lean forward, discerning his name upon the canvas; the work was so truly his own. In an art room it stood displayed, with a ticket, "For Sale."

Breathless, eager, Jane hastened into the store. "I wish to buy that picture," she said, with a fine disregard for price.

"Fifty dollars," announced the dealer, "and remarkably cheap for Mr. Gordon's work."

Jane closed her eyes in quick mental calculation. "I'll take it," she said. "Where to?" asked the dealer. "We box them carefully." And Jane gave her Hillcrest address.

Out again in the street she stopped dazedly, counting the change in her bag. She had just money enough to take her to lower Hillcrest—she would have to walk home from there. But hope, like the berries, again forced its bright way.

"He must have remembered," she murmured joyously. The placing of the picture required much care. Jane, standing upon a chair the following evening, seriously studied the question. After all, it was good to be back in the old familiar room. And then came a ringing of the bell. "If—anticipated Jane; then, smiled at the folly of her thought. She waited a moment, nevertheless, to loosen softly the waves of her hair; it was so she had worn it ten years ago. Then she opened the door.

John Gordon did not speak until he had entered the room, until his quick glance had traveled from Jane's face back to the picture.

"You—still live here?" he asked abruptly.

She nodded dumbly. "From the suite you were registered in at the hotel," he said, "as I saw you last night, from the price you paid for my very small picture, I fancied," he waved an arm about, "that you had grown away from this, that you had perhaps inherited money."

Jane spoke slowly. "I have no money," she told him.

"Then," he said, and bitterness was in his tone, "you bought the painting out of pity for me. You have heard of my failure. For all these discouraging years I've pressed doggedly on, refusing to give in. Persisting in my foolish dream of success. When I ceased writing to you it was because I could not bear to have you know of my failure, to sacrifice your life to a useless promise. When the great opportunity should come, and with it success, then I would return worthily to you." The man paused. "It did not come," he added quietly. "But stronger than myself was the yearning to see, and learn of you again. So I came back. The picture was offered as a last hope, to defray present expenses."

"When I found your name to be that of the purchaser, I realized fully the humility of my failure. Last night I wished to shrink away in my shabbiness, from your recognition. The man's voice broke huskily.

"Oh, Jane Rose, Jane Rose," he whispered, "how I deceived you with my dreams of long ago."

And Jane raised her face to his; wildly her heart was singing; forgotten were the long years of absence and neglect. What mattered poverty, or the shabby clothes of his humiliation? What mattered success or worldly failure? Love was here—love that forced its way through snows of disappointment and fallen leaves of change, love that triumphed.

"Jack," she cried tenderly and laid out her arms. And it was a long time after that the man, with a light of new purpose in his eyes, and the woman, smiling, radiant, moved forward together, to hang across the picture of "Hope."

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