

Rose

A short story

By Graham Price

He sat on the creaking verandah where it seemed safe, lowering himself stiffly — still not quite twenty-four but already tinkering with his memories, sifting the gold from the dross. The Robur Tea sign was still visible on the weatherboards — a sign of years past. He breathed heavily and placed the walking stick across his knees. The *Returned from Active Service Badge* glinted in the sunlight. Wonderful to be back here in this ferny countryside on such a warm Australian day, and the old grocery and general store behind him, long closed, with broken windows and peeling paint, drew him back in time to the glorious summer days of his youth.

He looked up the winding lane that ran on a diagonal away from the cross-roads. He had often walked there with Rose, where hidden deep within the ferns and the tall forest trees, they found their secret place, and where during the summer of 1914 he had first made love to her. It was a precious memory, still very much alive within him after these five years of being away. She had given a little laugh, then had closed her eyes. He had always considered that time with Rose was a spiritual union — anything else was second rate. He had felt lifted high above himself, floating — not of this world. But it only ever happened with Rose.

Several magpies caroled and swooped, as they had that day in early March. Just sitting there in this enchantment helped to remind him of the love he had felt for Rose.

She came into the store one afternoon when he was alone — his father and young sister, Nell, having gone in the old buggy for supplies at one of the orchards on the Belgrave road. He had been bagging up some two-pound packages of plain flour and some of the flour had covered his face. She laughed.

“More on you, than in the bags, I’d say!”

Oh, she was comely even then, fifteen, sixteen maybe, and he just eighteen. He was amazed at her forwardness; most of the girls in Turrengary Creek were shy creatures.

“Haven’t seen you before, miss!”

“Up from Melbourne, come to live with my aunts.” He detected a slight Irish accent from a generation back.

He rubbed his face, hoping that most of the flour would be gone. “Well, what can I do for you, miss, er.....”

“Rose,” she said, smiling at him. It was more of a beam than a smile, he thought. She placed her hands on the counter — oh, he liked those hands, and the slim arms that went with them, her deep green eyes, the long dark hair swinging loosely across her shoulders and down her tightly fitting pink floral dress. A very warm feeling surged through him, and his thoughts froze.

“Well.....what..... er, how can I help you?”

“Two pounds of sugar, half a dozen eggs, pound of butter.... some candles, half a packet of matches, eight ounces of almonds, and some of that flour on your face.....”

“Wooah..... not so fast..... one thing at a time!”

She laughed again. “Slowcoach!”

“Oh,” he said, “S’pose they do things faster in Melbourne, aye?”

“Depends,” she said, “on what one is doing.”

“Saucy little critter, aren’t you? Here’s your sugar, eggs, I’ll just go and get the rest.”

“That’s not all.... there’s more!”

“I might have known,” he said, retrieving the butter from a Coolgardie safe, “butter’s fresh today, but don’t dally on the way home. It’s warm out there.”

“What’s your name, grocer-boy?”

She was patting her slim fingers together in a prayerful

motion, and looking down at them as if contemplating something entirely different.

He put the matches and several candles on the counter. "Oh, the almonds, nearly forgot..... my name? Ah, Lewis Owen."

"Welsh, to be sure," she said, opening up a cotton string bag she had brought with her.

"Yes," he nodded, staring directly at her, now that his confidence was restored, "and descended from the Princes of Powys, too — Llewellyn the Great, and also Owain Glendwyr, or so I'm told. Family legend."

"Who?"

"Oh, it's Owen Glendower in English. Some of them even called him Glendoody. Crazy English. And your lot would be Irish?"

"Yes, and Catholic too."

He wondered if that was some kind of a warning to him. If it was, he didn't care. She was too beautiful to allow religion to come into it.

"Would you be paying for this, or are your aunts some of our regulars?"

"The Misses Cassidy! I reckon they'd be your regulars, Mr. Owen."

"Okay, I'll put it on the slate. Miss Annie does the accounts, and then there's Miss Florence. Very nice ladies. Is your surname Cassidy as well?"

"Nope. Connor."

"Ah, your mother is their sister."

"Very observant, Mr. Glendoody. So, you're certainly not Catholic. What are you then?"

"Presbyterian," he said, uttering it without thinking. *Lordy, she was fast, this one!*

"So, we're both Celtic! That's a good start..... now, some vanilla essence, castor sugar, and a bottle of cochineal!"

"Making a cake?"

"Aunt Florrie is, it's my birthday tomorrow."

"Sixteen, eh?" he said, smiling deeply at her.

"Very observant again, Mr. Doody!"

He laughed. "You're not going to put those whopping big candles on the cake?"

She giggled. "They'd look like columns on a wedding cake, wouldn't they?"

I like you, Rose Connor, he thought, I like you very much. Mr. Doody, eh? Oh well, what has to be, has to be.

He put out his right hand and touched hers. Their eyes met and she did not move her hand. Instead, she forced it lightly against the palm of his hand and gave a slight smile.

"Shall we be good friends, then, Rose Connor?"

"Always," she said, "forever.... 'till the end of time..... or as long as we both shall live!"

"Sounds very Biblical!"

"Yes, probably got it from my uncle — he's a priest."

At that point he sucked in his breath. Dangerous ground, this. Better back off — probably would be Father John Connor down the road at St. Patricks.... not a man to mess with.

"Say," she said, "Do you have any strawberries?"

"Ah, my dad will be bringing some back with him," and it was out of his mouth before he could stop it.... "would you like me to bring some around to the house when he comes back?"

She gathered her goods in the string bag and turned away, moving her head back towards him. "That would be very nice, Doody, very nice indeed."

He stood there transfixed with the smile still on his face. It was difficult to believe all this had happened within ten minutes.

She appeared at the door again.

"Forget something?"

"Yes," she said, coming up to the counter. "I need an

apple.”

“An apple? Just one?”

“Just one.”

“Oh, okay, just one. I’ll get it.”

“I’ll take it as it is,” she said. “No need to wrap it.”

“Sure, sure. No problem.”

He handed her an apple, wishing he could touch her slender arm as she reached out her hand and took it. She turned away, then looked back at him and smiled. “See you, then?”

“Yes, see you.”

He watched her tread along the verandah boards, down the three steps onto the red gravelled road, and stop at the horse trough. His horse was tied up in the shade beside the trough. Then he knew what she wanted the apple for. She stepped up to the horse and stroked his neck. The horse moved back and snorted.

“It’s all right, beauty. It’s all right.”

Lewis came out of the store and stood watching. She sensed his presence. “What’s his name?”

“Ranger!”

“Hello Ranger, lovely boy.... here’s a present.” She took a bite out of the fruit and pushed it toward the horse’s mouth.

Lewis didn’t think the horse would take it, but to his surprise Ranger lowered his head and nibbled at the apple. Lewis was amazed.... so she’d won his heart and that of his horse’s too? She continued to stroke the horse as he finished off the apple. Lewis watched her intently, noting her slim but shapely figure already fully ripened into womanhood. Best set of legs I’ve seen in a long time, he mused. Can’t let her go — too good to lose. It seemed as if she could have stayed there all afternoon until he called out.

“Don’t forget the butter, Rose, it’ll melt! Don’t stay too long.” It was only the second time he had spoken her name, and he felt himself repeating it silently, over and over. *Rose, Rose, Rose.....*

She smiled again, waved at him and spoke to the horse. “See you, Ranger, lovely boy.” The horse neighed and lifted his head. Suddenly she planted a kiss on the horse’s neck, and Lewis smiled. *Love this girl, really do. So, so different.*

Gallipoli had been hell, but the letters from Rose had soothed his wounds and his aches. He read them again and again by lamplight and brushed the lice away. Her letters came month after month through the stinking heat and then the misery of winter and he always wrote back the following day with that blue indelible pencil they were issued with. The paper usually came from the Red Cross and was sometimes marked with insect droppings. He’d survived by the time of the evacuation in December 1915 but had lost many of his mates. The shoulder wound he had sustained was a nuisance but would not prevent him from going on through Sinai and Palestine with his Light Horse Regiment. After being pronounced fit for duty it wasn’t long before he was sitting astride of his Waler, Ranger, moving across the hot sands in search of Johnny Turk and his German advisors.

But the letters from Rose had ceased. He continued to write every week but there was no reply, and it was strange that none of his letters were ever returned. During the Egyptian uprising of 1919 a stray bullet had hit him in the right hip, shattering any dreams he may have had for future horse riding. Such bad luck, to have survived with light wounds for five years through all that hell only to be struck down during Arab rioting. Not that he cared all that much because he had been forced to shoot Ranger several months before, like all the other Walers that couldn’t be returned to Australia because of quarantine reasons. A dreadful day that, and he had wept so deeply. It seemed that so much had been taken away from him and what was there left? His father had died. Rose had obviously moved on, deserted him no doubt for another man; he had lost his best friend, Ranger, four of his mates on Gallipoli and two in Palestine, been shot up himself several times. What was there to live for? But somehow the memory of Rose and those precious days back in Turrengary Creek returned to him again and again and kept him going. He was not sure what awaited him back home these days, but perhaps there was something he could find to keep him stable? And he needed something, he was sure of that.

Now, sitting on the creaking verandah, he pondered what the priest, Father John Connor, had told him that

morning. Rose had died during childbirth, and there could have been only one father of the child. The priest poured out a glass of wine for him and smiled benevolently.

Lewis sat the glass down on the edge of the arm chair. "And the baby?"

"Well, the problem was that after your father died and recently Rose's two elderly aunts also, there was nowhere the child could go except perhaps to an orphanage."

"A Catholic orphanage!"

"Oh, I know what you are thinking, but no."

"So?"

The silver-haired priest took a sip from his wine. "Your sister, Nell."

"My sister?"

"She took the child..... moved down to Melbourne..... we let her go.... it solved the problem of what to do..... seems to have been overlooked by the authorities."

"Good lord! Sorry Father, but..... why has all of this been kept from me?"

"Difficult times, my son..... difficult times. The country was at war and there were more important things on our minds."

"And the child?"

The priest scratched his face and smiled. "A girl. We called her Rose."

A breeze sprang up, flapping one of the old Robur Tea signs on top of the store, and he stared at the undergrowth lying between the fork of the two roads opposite. Rose..... Rose..... why did you never tell me? Were you afraid? Were you ashamed? A child conceived in that cathedral of ferns across the road five years ago and totally unknown to me. Destiny plays such strange tricks on one, but perhaps it's time to move on..... to find this child..... to find and know and love and care for this new Rose. There was something to live for, after all. And he heard her voice, as clear as on the day when he left for war. "I love you, Doody. Come back to me."