

ROSEBUD AND RED FLANNEL

By Ethel Pochocki

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A PAIR OF RED flannel long johns and a nightgown were hanging side by side on a clothesline, so close that their sleeves almost touched. But they never spoke to each other. The long johns said nothing because he was shy and clumsy in the company of someone so beautiful. The nightgown ignored him because she felt it beneath her dignity to speak with such a coarse fellow.

She conversed politely with the silk blouses, the lace-edged tablecloth, and sometimes with the embroidered guest towels. But while she felt it her duty to be civil with her equals, she did not encourage them to become familiar.

Although too shy to talk, the long johns almost tied himself in knots trying to get the nightgown's attention. He waved and clapped and flung his legs into the air, dancing with the wind. The long johns was a clown who had the socks and the aprons and the underpants laughing so hard, they wound themselves around the line.

This merry company, except for the nightgown, enjoyed their weekly roughhousing in the sun. Sometimes, in a stiff, brisk wind, the sheets blew up like hot-air balloons, and the line of bath towels, marching like soldiers, smacked each other in sharp good humor. And all the while, the long johns somersaulted about, trying to impress his love.

He was older than the nightgown and had a plaid patch on his knee, but he still felt as chipper as when he'd first appeared under the Christmas tree two years ago. True, he was thinner now, and his wool a bit scratchy from many washings, but he hadn't faded in the winter sun. And when spring came, he would be packed away safely in mothballs to hibernate in the attic.

The nightgown had just come to the house this past Christmas, and she was not happy about her lot. "I was made for a gentle life, a lady's life," she sighed, "not for hobnobbing with peasants. Oh, I suppose dishtowels and aprons have their place. It's

just that we have nothing in common. What do *I* have to do with their silly kitchen gossip?”

She remembered the exquisite care, which had gone into fashioning her, how the old ladies with their knobby fingers had sewn lace around her neck. She heard their musical French chatter as they'd spread her out on the coverlet, marveling over what they had done. To think she had traveled over an ocean to end up shivering on a clothesline next to this smirking oaf who couldn't speak a sensible sentence! Why couldn't her mistress hang her indoors over the big black stove? It would be more dignified than this.

But as the washdays passed, she realized that she wouldn't improve things by sulking. A thing of beauty soon withers in the damp of self-pity, she told herself, admiring such a deep thought. She resolved to find some small thing to enjoy each day. Today she rejoiced in the bright blue sky and thought how lovely she must look against it. She dangled gracefully from the wooden clothespins, and the heart of the long johns flipped as she accidentally brushed against him.

He flapped his arms and threw his legs over the line. As usual, she ignored him. She could tell by the cast of the sun that it was almost midafternoon, time for the mistress to come and gather the clothes into a large wicker basket. Inside the kitchen, the mistress would shake them out and smooth and fold them. She would fluff up the nightgown and hold her to her face, sighing, “Oh, you are so beautiful, I shall keep you forever!”

But on this day, the mistress didn't come, for she had gone to the village for groceries. The bright blue sky began to darken, turning sullen and very quiet, as if it knew something was going to happen. Then, slowly, the snow began to fall, little dancing flakes at first, then larger, heavier ones. They turned to hard crystal pellets that made a pittering sound as they hit the ground and the trees. Houses and roads disappeared, and soon only the snowplow's headlights could pierce the white curtain.

The nightgown was terrified. Never had she been in a snowstorm! The long johns had survived many such squalls and had even been frozen once. He shuddered at the memory. He had been dancing, but when the snows had come so suddenly, he could neither bend nor move. He'd heard his legs crack against the clothesline as if

they were boards. For several days he'd hung, frozen as a statue. Finally when the storm died, the mistress had brought him into the kitchen to thaw.

Now he wondered if it would happen again. And what of his love, so sweet, so fragile. How could he protect her? Already the bath towels and the hunting socks had stiffened. He could not feel his legs. He must act quickly before the ice took his arms. For the first time, he spoke to the nightgown.

“Sweet Rosebud, listen to me—can you move?”

One of her clothespins had already been whipped off, and she dangled by one shoulder. “Yes, I ... I think so. But I feel heavy, and the lace at my wrist is hard ...” She was so frightened, she spoke to the long johns as if he were her equal.

“Quickly, then, when the next gust of wind comes, lean toward me. Quickly, before my arms freeze. Here comes a good one. Now, *jump!*” At that moment, the wind tore off the other clothespin, and the nightgown fell into the arms of the long johns. He wrapped them around her tightly, so that when they froze, she would be safe within them. He couldn't think beyond that.

The wind gathered its strength for one final gigantic blast. It tore the towels and the tablecloths and the long johns off the line and sent them whirling up, up into the sky and out of sight.

By the time the wind wearied and the snowflakes turned gentle again, the mistress had returned. She and her children and her husband searched and searched for the missing clothes, but only the red gingham tablecloth was ever found, atop a neighbor's doghouse. The mistress grieved for her lovely nightgown. She had owned it only a month.

Meanwhile, the long johns and the nightgown had landed in a farmer's meadow several towns away. There they lay, frozen together under the snow. When spring came and the snow melted, they thawed in the sun. And when they woke, the nightgown found that her heart had also thawed. She knew now that this fellow she'd once thought common was really a true gentleman of such courage that he would give his life for her. And because he knew his love was returned, the long johns no longer felt shy and clumsy.

When the frozen earth turned to spring mud, they heard the cows plodding up to the haystack where they lay. The farm animals nuzzled the long john's legs and chewed at the nightgown's ribbon.

"Oh, dear," she worried, "now what? Did we live this long just to be eaten by cows? Do they think we are hay?"

She felt muddy hoofs walking over her and she sobbed, remembering the ladies sewing on her delicate collar.

"Here, what's this?" asked a gruff voice. A farmer stood above them, hands on hips, eyebrows bristling. "How in tarnation did a pair of red flannels and a nightie get into my pasture?" And he laughed and picked them up and brought them to his wife.

"I know just what to do with them," she said with a smile. "They'll make wonderful scarecrows, Jasper."

So the farmer stuffed them with straw and gave them a backbone of wood, and the long johns guarded the cornfield, while the nightgown fluttered over the cabbages.

And all summer long, they called out to each other.

"Red Flannel, tell me a joke!"

"Rosebud, my love, sing me a song!"

All day they joked and sang and told their deepest thoughts to each other, and at night they danced in the moonlight to the tunes of crickets.