Rose Orchid

by Rex Stout, 1886-1975

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Accepting as postulates the assertions that human beings are pegs, and that Lieutenant-Commander Brinsley Reed, U. S. N. was a human being, it follows with certainty that he was beautifully fitted for his particular hole.

He was third in his class out of Annapolis. By the time he attained his two full stripes he had successfully dominated three junior messes and been the subject of unusual commendation in two wardrooms; and before he had advanced halfway up the list he was known as the best deck officer in the North Atlantic.

Four different captains applied for his services as executive when he passed into the next rank. But Lieutenant-Commander Reed, who had ideas of his own concerning the proper discipline of a ship, and who was lucky enough to possess a key to a certain door in the Bureau at Washington, disappointed them all by obtaining for himself the command of the gunboat HELENA.

For the two years that followed, every man who had the good fortune to be transferred from the HELENA to another ship swore at every chance, with violent and profane asseveration, that the HELENA was a „madhouse."

„The old man's a holy terror," they would say. „Bag and hammock inspection and fire drill twice a week. Abandon ship three times a month; and when he can't think of nothing else it's general quarters. For a seagoin' hat it's ten days in the brig. And brasswork? Say! Why, this is a home!"

All of which meant to indicate that Lieutenant-Commander Reed was one of those persons who illustrate and justify the rather curious order of the words in the phrase: an officer and a gentleman.

He had at one time believed in the Bible; but it had long ago been discarded for the Blue Book, which is officially known as »Navy Regulations, 1914«.

In the third winter under his command, at the conclusion of the annual target practice and maneuvers at Guantanamo, the HELENA was ordered to San Juan to relieve the CHESTER, which was returning to go into dry dock at New York.

Lieutenant-Commander Reed was much pleased at this, for two reasons: first, it would remove him from continual subordination to a flag officer; and second, he would have an opportunity to visit a boyhood friend whom he had not seen for many years, and who was now the owner of a tobacco plantation in Puerto Rico. The HELENA had lain at San Juan for a month the previous spring; but the lieutenant-commander had not then known that his friend was on the island.

After all, the visit proved to be disappointing. I will not go so far as to say that Lieutenant-Commander Reed had lost all social instinct, but the fact is that in his endeavor to perfect himself as a military machine he had forgotten how to be a man. He found his friend dull, and his friend found him insufferable.

For two days they made a pretense of amusing each other. On the third morning the lieutenant-commander begged his friend to take no notice of his presence, but to follow his own inclinations; the guest would amuse himself.

„Very well," the other agreed, „then I shall ride over to the north enclosure; the carts should arrive today. You won't join me?"

The lieutenant-commander refused, and spent a miserable day lounging in a hammock between two giant cedars, drinking crushed pineapple and reading some ancient copies of popular magazines. That evening he announced his intention of returning to the HELENA at San Juan on the following morning.

„But you were to stay a week," his host protested rather feebly. „And a rest will do you good. It's not very amusing out here, but I'd be glad to have you. What's the hurry?"

„Confound your politeness," said the lieutenant-commander, who regarded bluntness as an untainted virtue. „It's no good, Dick; we don't cut in. We're only in each other's way—and I want to get back to the ship."

Accordingly, at four o'clock in the following afternoon (the start having been postponed some hours on account of the midday heat), the lieutenant-commander mounted his little native pony that had carried him from San Juan to Cerrogordo in six hours, waved a last farewell to his host, and departed on his journey of forty miles across the mountains, through the foothills and down the long plain to the sea.

As he turned into the white wagon road that leads through San Lorenzo, the lieutenant-commander felt a pleasant sense of relief.

He understood himself perfectly. Stern, passionately fond of authority, conscious of but one code of morals and of conduct, and supremely happy in his power and ability to enforce it, he was utterly unable to breathe in any other atmosphere than that of his cabin. As his pony carried him forward, past the wonderful blue limestone cliffs and innumerable rushing streams of the southern slope of the Sierra de Luquillo, his mind was thirty miles away, on the decks of the HELENA.

It dwelt on a score of petty details: the independence of Ensign Brownell, the return of Quartermaster Moran, the disgraceful condition of the pay storeroom at the last Sunday inspection. He considered these matters at some length; he liked their flavor; and he earnestly desired to deal out justice—according to the code.

At Caguas, where he stopped for a cooling drink and a few minutes‘ rest, he was advised to postpone the continuance of his journey.

„It is dangerous, señor,“ said the proprietor of the little shop. „See!“

He pointed to the northeast, where, above the top of the dim, blue range, a black cloud was proceeding slowly westward, like a giant treading ponderously from peak to peak.

„Well, what of it?“

„It means a storm, señor; you will be drenched. And the trail over the mountains—at night—“

But the lieutenant-commander stopped him with a gesture, mounted his pony, and departed.

He was very nearly in the center of the range, within two miles of the village of Rio, when the storm finally broke. It began with a mild drizzle; and the lieutenant-commander dismounted long enough to unstrap the rubber poncho from his saddle and put it on.

He had not proceeded a hundred yards farther when the rain began to descend in torrents. At the same moment the fast approaching darkness came like a blanket over the narrow trail; and the traveler found himself fighting blindly against whirling sheets of water and the impenetrable blackness of a tropical night.

He soon gave up the attempt to guide his pony; it required all his strength, bending over close against the animal‘s neck, to maintain his seat. The roar of the wind and the descendin‘ torrents seemed terrific; he was incapable of thought or movement.

Something brushed violently against his body, and he felt the pony sway and stumble; then a jar, a feeling as though he was being hurled violently through space…

The lieutenant-commander sat up, glanced round, and cursed long and variously. He wanted to know where in the name of th‘ Seven Seas—Then he remembered.

He started to rise to his feet, and suddenly became conscious of a sharp, stinging pain in his left arm; and, trying to raise it, found that it hung helpless at his side. With another oath he stood up and stamped vigorously to assure himself

of the seaworthiness of his legs, and gave an involuntarily grunt of pain as the shock communicated itself to the broken arm.

The storm was past.

Overhead the stars gleamed with the soft brilliance of the South. About and above him the thick foliage waved its broad fingers mysteriously in the gentle breeze, and through a rift to the left could be seen the uncertain white outline of a limestone cliff. Toward this the lieutenant-commander made his way, thinking to find the trail. The pony was not to be seen.

For perhaps half an hour he searched for the trail, stumbling over roots and fallen branches, occasionally brought to an abrupt stop by a growth of shrubbery and vines too dense to penetrate.

At every step a shiver of pain ran through his body from the injured arm, and his head felt faint and dizzy.

Suddenly he found himself in an open clearing, at the farther end of which he saw a light shining from the window of a cottage. He staggered to it painfully and hammered on the door.

The door opened; the floor seemed to rise to meet him; and once more all was darkness.

When he awoke it was to a feeling of the most delicious warmth and weariness. For some minutes after he became conscious he kept his eyes closed, merely through the lack of desire to open them. Suddenly he heard a voice at his elbow The words were Spanish.

„No, beloved, he is still asleep.“

Another voice, a man‘s, came from across the room.

„But are you sure?“

„But yes. Really there is no cause for worry. Except for the arm, there is no injury.“

„All right. Come here, Rita.“

The lieutenant-commander opened his eyes. It was broad daylight; evidently he had remained unconscious, or had slept, for many hours. He noted a small bamboo table placed close by the couch on which he lay, an American wicker rocking chair, a homemade palm screen; then his gaze wandered across the room, where stood the owners of the voices.

The girl was directly in front of the man, disclosing to view only the outlines of his figure. Suddenly she moved to one side; and the lieutenant-commander gave a start of surprise and closed his eyes involuntarily.

Then he opened them again, slowly and cautiously. The man‘s face stood out clearly in the light from the open window; and there could be no mistake.

„Decidedly,“ thought the lieutenant-commander, „I‘m in a devil of a hole. The wonder is I‘m still alive.“

Then he lay silent, feigning sleep, and overheard the following dialogue:

„Well, I must go,“ accompanied by a masculine sigh.

„But, Tota! I‘ve been waiting for you to say that; I‘ve seen it in your eyes. This is our holiday; you promised it.“

„Now, little one, don‘t be unreasonable. How could I foretell the storm? And those hombres; you know what they‘re like. If it were not for the little trees—“

„Very well; then do you go. I shall not miss you; I shall amuse the stranger. I shall sing to him, and prepare for him the little yellow bisca, and perhaps—“

The voice ended with an indescribable tone of teasing suggestion.

„Rita! What do you mean?“

There came the sound of feet scurrying across the floor, sigh, a little breathless laugh, then:

„Oh, Tota, my beloved! Well then, kiss me, kiss me! Ah!“

There was a pause, then the man‘s voice: „And now—“

„Now you may go. But I shall go with you to the spring. And I want—but come, I‘ll tell you on the way.“

The lieutenant-commander heard them go out, leaving the door open behind them; and he opened his eyes and thought swiftly.

He understood at once that he had not been recognized; which was easily accounted for by the facts that he was in „civilians,“ and that in the past six months he had grown a beard. But there still remained some danger; and this position of insecurity and helplessness was extremely unpleasant. Decidedly, he must get away at the very first opportunity. The first thing to do was to find out about his pony. He would ask the girl when she returned.

Then, suddenly, the lieutenant-commander became aware of the fact that he felt exceedingly comfortable. Only his poncho, coat, and boots had been removed, he was covered only by a coarse cotton cloth, and there was a dull, aching pain in the injured arm from wrist to shoulder; still he felt unaccountably easy and contented.

The room, which he now noticed for the first time, though uncarpeted and with bare walls, had an indefinable air of coziness, even of refinement. The light entered with a soft glow at the window opposite, which he surmised to be toward the west; over the other window a green shade was drawn, to exclude the tropical sun.

Two or three wicker chairs, an American sewing machine, and a table or two were all the room contained; yet such was its effect that the lieutenant-commander, who had never noticed a mere room before in all his life, found himself studying it with interest and appreciation.

He was roused by the sound of approaching footsteps, and looked up to see the girl coming up the path toward the open door. In her arms was a huge bunch of rose orchids.

She entered the room silently and placing the flowers on a table, tiptoed to the side of the couch. Then seeing that the lieutenant-commander‘s eyes were wide open, she smiled brightly.

„Ah! The señor is awake.“

„Yes.“ In spite of himself, he smiled back at her.

„Well! But you have slept a very long time. And the arm—does it pain you greatly?“

She carefully drew back the coverlet, and the lieutenant-commander perceived for the first time that the sleeve of his shirt had been slit to the shoulder and his arm encased in rude splints and bandages.

„Why—I didn‘t know—“ he said, „thanks to you, it is really comfortable.“

„That is well. We did the best we could. Oh, but I was so frightened when the señor tumbled in at the door! I thought you were dead. And Tota—Mr. Hurley—

that is, my husband—he thought you would never—but oh!“ She stopped short, and a look of real horror appeared on her face.

„What is it?“ the lieutenant-commander asked in alarm.

„Why, the señor must be starved!“ she cried. „And here I stand and talk like an old woman.“

She turned without another word and fled into the kitchen.

From thence, for the following fifteen minutes, there issued a series of most tantalizing sounds and smells. The lieutenant-commander had not realized it before, but he was hungry—incredibly so.

„Will the señor use the goat‘s milk?“ Rita called from the kitchen.

„No; make it black, please,“ he replied.

He was served on the bamboo table, drawn up close to the couch. Rita, saying that she had work in the next room, instructed him to call if he needed anything. Then, struck by a sudden thought, she bent over the table and cut his meat into little squares, broke the hard bread into small pieces, and separated the sections of grapefruit, saying:

„I forgot about the señor‘s arm. Of course, you are helpless—like a baby.“

Despite the difficulty of eating with one hand, he found the meal incredibly good. There were alligator pears, broiled ham, a spiced omelet, black steaming coffee, and several kinds of fruit.

When he had finished Rita appeared and, after asking if he smoked, cut off the end of a cigar and lighted it for him! He lay back on the couch and puffed away in glorious content, thinking of nothing.

The morning passed. Rita tripped in and out, lightly, her little sandaled feet gliding noiselessly over the bare floor, stopping now and then to inquire if the señor was comfortable.

She arranged the rose orchids in a red jar and placed them near him, on the bamboo table. Once she appeared in the doorway to say that her husband had found the señor‘s pony, unharmed, m the grove of tillandsias over near the trail. She had forgotten to tell the señor before.

„Ah!“ said the lieutenant-commander. He ought to have been pleased by this information, and perhaps he was. But he made no comment.

Early in the afternoon Rita, having completed her household tasks, sat down in the wicker rocking chair and began to talk. She had brought in a pitcher of pineapple juice and offered a glass of it to the señor, who leaned back against a heap of cushions and sipped luxuriously.

„The señor was going to San Juan?“ said Rita abruptly

The lieutenant-commander nodded.

„Ah! It is a wonderful city—San Juan. I used to live there.“ She sighed, and clasped her hands back of her head. Her form, small and wonderfully graceful, was outlined against the back of the chair like the „Sibyl“ of Velasquez.

„It was very gay. The music at night, and the promenade, and the little chairs that used to fall under the weight of the big Americans. And how we would scowl when we were forced to stand while they played the—what you call it?—the *Star Spangle Banner!*“

The lieutenant-commander sipped away in silence, watching her.

Rita sighed again.

„Oh, it all seems so very long ago! And yet it is only a few months. And perhaps, some day I shall see it again.“

„Are you lonely—out here?“

The lieutenant-commander realized with surprise that he was really interested to know her answer.

He read it in her eyes. They grew large, and glowed with eloquent negation.

„No, no! How could I be, with Tota?“ Involuntarily, as she pronounced the name, her voice softened with tenderness. „That is my husband,“ she continued proudly.

„You have not seen him. He is an American, too. And one thing is hard—it is that I never can talk about him. Even my mother—she was angry when Tota took me away. I suppose that is why,“ she threw at the señor a glance at once ingenuous and reserved, „I want to talk to you.“

The lieutenant-commander felt uncomfortable.

„So you are married,“ he observed foolishly.

Rita frowned. Then the frown gave way to a little, amused, happy laugh.

„Why, what does the señor think? But then, you Americans are all alike. That is, all except Tota! He will be here soon; he wants to see you. He is a very wonderful man, and so good, señor.“

„I have no doubt of it,“ the lieutenant-commander said dryly.

„Yes. We came here but nine, ten months ago, and already we have many acres of coffee trees. There were some—that was m May—already in bloom. Have you ever seen them, señor? The little white blossoms that look like tiny stars, they are so very white? Tota says he prefers them brown, like my face,“ and she laughed delightedly at her Tota‘s stupid joke.

Of this chatter the lieutenant-commander was hearing very little; but he was looking at Rita—her soft brown, slender arms, her lithe form, full of nervous grace, her dark, glowing, ever-changing eyes. I have not attempted to describe her, and I shall not; you must use your imagination. You may judge a little of her charm by the fact that, as he sat and looked at her and listened to her voice, Lieutenant-Commander Reed, for the first time in his life, had emotions.

For an hour she rattled on, mostly of Tota, and the señor sat and sipped pineapple, now and then interposing a nod or a word. He became utterly unconscious of everything in the world but her presence and his delight in it, and he felt a distinct and disagreeable shock when the door was suddenly opened and a man appeared in the room.

It was Hurley.

Rita sprang from her chair and ran to him.

„Tota!“ she cried.

Hurley folded her in his arms and kissed her.

„Well, little one, I kept my promise.“ Then he turned to th‘ señor, „You must excuse us,“ he smiled, utterly unabashed.

Rita had an arm about his neck and was clinging to the lapel of his jacket with the other hand.

The lieutenant-commander was experiencing a curious and hitherto undreamed-of sensation. A lump in his throat was choking him, and he felt a tight gripping in his chest. But his mind was working rapidly; and he made his decision almost without hesitation.

„I‘ve been waiting for you,“ he said to Hurley. „I understand you found my pony. Bring him up.“

At the tone of command the man started and glanced keenly at the lieutenant-commander, who remembered too late that he should have attempted to disguise his voice. He thought of his broken arm, and braced himself for whatever might come.

Hurley walked over to the couch and stood looking down at him in silence. The expression in his eyes was distinctly unpleasant; but the lieutenant-commander perceived that it was alloyed with doubt.

„Have I ever seen you before?“ Hurley said finally.

The lieutenant-commander achieved a smile of surprise.

„What makes you think so?“ he asked.

„Why did you speak to me—like that?“

The lieutenant-commander, being rather clever, did not make the mistake of apologizing. Instead, his tone was one of irritation as he said: „How do I know? Do you expect a man with a broken arm to get up and bow?“

For another minute Hurley stood above him, eyeing him keenly. Then he turned.

„I don‘t know,“ he muttered. „I‘ll bring up your pony. Come Rita; you come with me.“

They returned shortly with the pony, saddled and bridled. Hurley, sending Rita to another room, helped the lieutenant-commander put on his coat and boots, placed the injured arm in a sling, and strapped his poncho back of the saddle. Then he steadied him with both hands, carefully, while he mounted.

„You ought to be in San Juan by seven,“ said Hurley, standing in the doorway. „That‘s a good hour and a half before dark. The trail runs over there,“ pointing to the west, „by that first blue cliff. You can‘t miss it. And I guess I made a mistake in there,“ he continued, a little awkwardly. „I meant no offense, sir.“

For more reasons than one the lieutenant-commander made no reply. He started the pony as gently as possible out of respect for the broken arm, and nodded a farewell. As he met the trail under the cliff, he turned and looked back. Hurley and Rita were standing together in the doorway.

Lieutenant-Commander Reed was a man of decision. Whenever he met a problem he liked to face it squarely, analyze it thoroughly, and decide it quickly. This he had always done.

But the problem which was now before him defied analysis. It seemed somehow intangible, fleeting, ungraspable. He tried one after another of his cherished rules, and found that none of them fitted.

For the first three hours of the last stage of his journey to San Juan his mind was in an uncomfortable and entirely unique condition of flexibility. As might have been expected, the weight of habit preponderated and he decided in favor of duty.

Owing to the broken arm, the four hours‘ ride was slow and painful, but he suffered no further mishap. As Hurley had predicted, exactly at seven o‘clock he climbed from the Naval Station wharf at San Juan into the Commandant‘s gig.

On board the HELENA all was confusion and despair. They had not expected their Commanding Officer for another four days, and they were having the time of their lives.

The first luff, who was an easygoing, good-natured fellow, who possessed a hearty dislike for his skipper, had taken advantage of his absence.

There had been no inspections or drills of any kind, the brasswork had not been touched, the decks had received merely a gentle flushing with the hose, and every classed man on the ship had been granted shore liberty.

You may imagine the effect of this state of affairs on Lieutenant-Commander Reed. Within two hours after his arrival every man and officer on board was ready for insubordination or mutiny, or worse, and the first luff heard his skipper‘s voice in his dreams.

At eleven o‘clock the following morning Lieutenant-Commander Reed sat in his cabin, holding a pen in his hand and gazing thoughtfully at a pad of official memorandum paper on the desk before him.

He had got his disordered ship and crew in something like a presentable and tractable condition, and was preparing to put into effect his decision of the afternoon before.

He frowned and sighed at intervals, and finally rose, walked over to a porthole and stood for some time gazing out on El Morro and the rocky coast.

Finally, with a gesture of decision, he returned to the desk, arranged the pad of paper, and wrote as follows:

> Ensign G. J. Rowley, U. S. N., U. S. S. HELENA.
>
> Sir: You will take four men and proceed at once to the village of Rio, twenty miles from San Juan on the Caguas road. Two miles beyond Rio, in a cottage three hundred yards to the left of the trail, you will find James Moser, Chief Yeoman, a deserter from the U. S. S. HELENA. He has assumed the name of Hurley. You will arrest him and deliver him on shipboard. You are advised to proceed with caution.
>
> Respectfully, Brinsley Reed, Lt.-Comd‘r.,
> U. S. N., Commanding.

He read the order through slowly, and pushed a button on the desk for his orderly. Then removing the order from the pad, he reread it more slowly still, while a deep frown gathered on his forehead.

The decision had been made.

Suddenly he opened a drawer at the side of his desk and took from it—a rose orchid!

I have no idea where he got it; possibly he had taken advantage of Rita‘s absence while she had gone with Tota to fetch the pony.

But then that is scarcely possible, since the lieutenant-commander was the last man in the world to be swayed by any weak sentiment.

„Did you ring, sir?“

The orderly‘s voice sounded from the doorway, and his commanding officer actually blushed as he hastily slipped the orchid back into the drawer.

Then he turned to the orderly:

„Learn to stand at attention till you‘re spoken to!“ he roared. „No, I didn‘t ring! Get out of here!“

It is little wonder that Ensign Rowley failed to carry out the order, since it was no part of his duty to go searching about in his skipper‘s waste basket for torn bits of paper.