

# The Glass Roses

*By: Alden Nowlan*

Every night for six weeks the wind had risen to gale force as soon as the sun went down. Lying on his straw-filled bunk, Stephen heard it howl under the eaves of the bunkhouse, batter the tarpapered walls and make despondent, blowing sounds in the snow-weighted boughs of the spruces. He drew the dirty army blankets tighter under his chin. The sound alone was enough to make him shiver.

In the sooty obscurity of a gas lantern, four men played cards beside the pot-bellied wood stove. They were burly, red-faced men in wool work pants and checkered jackshirts. Each night since Stephen had joined the pulp-cutting crew, and through each of the days when snow kept them from work, they had played Auction 45's. Like everything else they did, their card playing was serious and purposeful. They spoke only when they made their bids. To Stephen, watching them from his upper bunk, it seemed they sat frozen for hours, moving only their hands. Enviously he studied their family humped backs and ox-like shoulders. He thought despairingly of his own willowy fifteen-year-old body. The more he observed the easy strength of these men, the oftener he worked himself into aching exhaustion at the end of a pulpsaw, the more certain he was that he could never become a man.

The huskiest and most solemn of the card players was the foreman of the crew of six who occupied the bunkhouse. This man was Stephen's father. "You got to start actin' like a man if you want to hold down a man's job," he had warned. "There ain't no room for kids in the pulp woods." The boy winced, remembering the too-familiar squint of doubt, the hard knots of disappointment above the cold grey eyes.

A gust shook the camp and made the white flame of the lantern flicker. Beside him in the bunk, the Polack stirred, moaning, in his sleep. Stephen raised himself on an elbow and shook his shoulder. With a muffled groan he jerked awake.

"I guess you was havin' a nightmare," Stephen whispered.

The Polack ran his fingers through his disheveled hair.

"Yes."

His eyes, which seemed to focus on the other side of the room, were so bleak with fear that Stephen swung around and looked in the same direction. He saw only the greasy, unbarked slabs of the wall.

The Polack chuckled. He had such nightmares almost every night, but the fear seemed to leave him as soon as he was wholly awake. "It is strange, the things one remembers," he murmured.

As they always did, Stephen and the Polack spoke too low for the others to hear. In talking with the others, the Polack garbled his sentences as though his mouth were full of cotton wool. Stephen stood speechless with astonishment when, on their second day as partners at the edge of the northwest clearing, he had first heard him speak English coherently.

"Yeah?" Stephen invited. His fascination with tales of far places has attracted him to the Polack. But he felt that his interest in such stories was childish: an aspect of the boyish daydreaming that he was expected to scorn now that he was becoming a man. Apprehensively he glanced over the edge of his bunk to assure himself that none of the others overheard.

The Polack lay back on the sour-smelling pillows and gazed at the newspaper-lined ceiling.

His voice made Stephen's flesh tingle as at the approach of sleep.

"In our house in Tarnopol, there were glass roses. Pretty little flowers made of red glass. My mother was very proud of them. She would let no one touch them... When the first bombs fell, farther down the street, the glass roses were shaken from the mantel and they fell on the floor and broke in a million pieces." He raised himself on his elbows to roll a cigarette. "That is a very silly thing of one to remember."

Stephen thought for a long moment. "I don't think it's silly," he said.

"There is not much room in the world for glass roses," the Polack said gently, blowing purple tobacco smoke toward the ceiling.

The card players rose from their benches. One by one they went outdoors to urinate. Each time the door opened, Stephen's flesh goose-pimpled in the clutch of the cold. His father and the others grunted and spat in the stove, then pulled off their boots and pants and climbed into their bunks. The last man extinguished the lantern. In the darkness Stephen thought of glass roses and listened to the wail of the ten-below-zero wind.

The cook, whose quarters were separated from the bunkhouse by a partition of rough boards, woke the men at five-thirty. After eating their breakfast of pork and pancakes by lanternlight, they gathered up their saws and axes and started in pairs for their various stations in the woods. The first mustard-colored streaks of daylight were appearing on the black-forested, snow-shrouded horizon.

The wind had fallen somewhat, but it was still raw enough to lacerate Stephen's temples. The cold gnawed at his legs and forced watery mucus from his nostrils. Head down, he walked beside the Polack in the deep-rutted logging road.

"Sometimes I think this country does not like people," the Polack shouted above the wind.

Stephen laughed, almost in embarrassment. The Polack was the only foreigner he had ever known, and he often said things no ordinary pulp-cutter would have dreamt of saying.

"Or perhaps it is only that God made this country to teach man humility," the Polack yelled, his voice a flapping wisp in the wind.

Stephen laughed again. As they went deeper into the woods, great spruce and fir trees broke the force of the wind. In a way, Stephen reflected, it was fun to be with the Polack. When he worked with the other men, they spoke only when it was necessary to give commands or criticism. But he knew his father despised the Polack and he suspected that they had been consigned together as the crew's clumsiest and weakest members.

The day's work began. Stephen chopped a notch in a spruce. Each time his axe struck the tree, showers of snow poured from the branches and sifted down his neck. Twice he misjudged his stroke and hit the trunk with the handle, the shock of it burning his wrists. The axe made him feel stupid and ridiculous. It did not belong to him. He could not think of himself as a woodsman. In using the axe, he was pretending to be something he was not, something he might never be. When his father worked an axe, it was as though the blade grew out of his arm.

He and the Polack took hold of opposite ends of the saw and knelt by the tree. On the first stroke Stephen exerted too much pressure and the blade buckled.

"You try too hard, kid," the Polack murmured. "You act as if the saw were the most important thing in the world."

"Maybe."

"The world would not come to an end if it took us all day to cut this one tree down."

"I guess not."

Stephen decided glumly that foreigners did not know when to keep their mouths shut. The Polack grinned. Purring, the saw sank slowly into the frozen wood.

As they cut deeper, the weight of the tree lay heavy on the blade. Stephen closed his eyes, the better to concentrate on the effort of bringing the saw back each time the Polack pulled it away from him. He thought of the dozens of trees they would have to fell before the end of the day, the millions of trees he would have to fell before he died. For as long as he lived, he would kneel beside a tree, a slave to the monotonous rhythm of the pulpsaw.

"Gently, now, gently," the Polack admonished.

"Look, I don't need no advice," Stephen gritted. "You take care of your end of the saw and I'll look after mine. Okay?"

The Polack grinned again. After ten minutes of sawing, the tree creaked like a dry hinge and gave way. Snow rose like the smoke of an explosion when it struck the ground.

They chopped off limbs and sawed the tree into four-foot lengths. "I'm sorry I made you angry," the Polack said.

Stephen blinked and looked away. In his world, men did not tender apologies.

"It don't matter," he mumbled.

"Today when we eat lunch I will tell you about Cracow."

"Cracow," Stephen said, liking the sound of the word.

"Cracow," the Polack repeated.

He paused for a moment before completing his saw stroke.

"Once I was there and saw the cathedral."

Stephen let go of the saw and beat his mittened hands together.  
"What was it like – the cathedral?"

"Very beautiful. You would like to hear about it, eh?"

"Yes," Stephen said, feeling a little twinge of guilt. He was a man now. Men did not tell one another fairy tales about cathedrals. But his father and the men at the bunkhouse need never know –

"I was only eight years old when I saw Cracow. My oldest brother was in the cavalry. He had red things on his shoulders – epaulettes – and he wore a saber. That day there was a parade for the president." The Polack sighed. "He was killed on the first day of the war, my brother. They were very pretty, but not much good against tanks, those cavalrymen."

"Sabers," Stephen said, "Jesus." He was thinking of the yelling, saber-wielding horsemen he had seen in movies. The Polack ran his hand through thick black hair.

"Now we must get back to work," he said. "At noon I will tell you about the cathedral."

For a few minutes they sawed in silence.

"Look," Stephen stammered suddenly.

"Yes, what should I look at, eh?"

"Oh, I don't mean, look. I mean, well, I'm sorry I got mad at you."

He flushed, feeling childish and ludicrous, wishing he had kept his mouth shut.

"We are friends then?"

"Yeah."

Convinced that he had been guilty of a babyish weakness, Stephen began sawing furiously.

By noon their sandwiches were frozen as hard as cedar shingles. Squatting behind a windbreak of logs, they speared them on slivers of pine and held them over a small fire until they were fried in the fat of margarine and bologna. They drank boiled tea out of tin mugs without removing their mittens.

As they ate, the Polack talked of an ancient city and of a cathedral with spires and domes. He told of bearded, black-robed priests and of chanting monks and of altar boys who carried burning incense through the streets during holy-day processions. Stephen sat enthralled, scarcely noticing the Canada Jays, white and mouse-grey like the colour of winter, through they flew almost close enough to snatch the food from his hands.

"I was very small then," the Polack said. "I was nine when the Russians came to Tarnopol. When the Germans came, I was twelve."

Stephen chewed sizzling bologna. "I'd like to see Poland," he said. "I'd like to see Poland and France and Italy. I'd like—" He left the sentence unfinished. He was not certain what he felt.

The Polack moved closer to the fire. The evergreens bowed, as though resignation, before the wind. "I am not Polish," he said. "I am Ukrainian."

"You ain't a Polack then?" Stephen asked in bewilderment.

The Polack shrugged. "Yesterday the Ukrainians were called Poles. Today they are called Russians. Me, I am either a Polack or a Canadian." For a few minutes they ate in silence.

"My name is Leka," the Polack said abruptly.

"Leka," Stephen repeated.

"Now I think we had better forget about the cathedrals and begin to think of the pulpwood. Your father, the foreman, says we cut the least of any pair of choppers in the woods."

"Yeah I know," Stephen said bitterly.

Suddenly the Polack reached out and pinched the boy's cold reddened cheek.

"Don't be so sad, little one," he smiled.

Stephen stood up and kicked snow over the fire.

"Tomorrow perhaps I will tell you about Wiesbaden."

"Wiesbaden, is that in Poland?"

"Wiesbaden is in Germany. During the war I worked there: making hand grenades for the Germans, Every April we were given a holiday in honor of Hitler's birthday." The Polack laughed. "When the planes came, the British and Americans, we used to hope some of their bombs would hit the factory. But they never did."

The Polack smiled at Stephen as though in some mysterious way he were pitying him, rather than himself.

"No, I don't think I want to talk about Wiesbaden. I will tell you more About Tarnopol and my mother's glass roses. It is better to talk about things like that." The Polack rolled a cigarette and scratched a match on the zipper of his windbreaker.

"The roses that got smashed," Stephen said.

"Eh? Yes, the roses that got smashed." He picked up his axe and selected a tree. "They were very pretty, those little glass roses, I need only close my eyes and I can see them."

"But they got smashed," Stephen insisted.

The Polack's axe thudded home. "In the morning, when the sun came up, the first little shafts of light would strike those roses. You see the mantel was opposite the window. Yes, they were very beautiful..."

The tree notched, Stephen fetched the pulpsaw. The Polack spat out, his cigarette and knelt opposite him. Stephen shut his eyes and forced the blade into the obdurate wood.

"Gently, now, gently," the Polack counseled.

Now there was neither time nor energy for talk. By midafternoon Stephen slumped and staggered with weariness. Dull pains nagged his shoulders, hips and calves. But more crushing than the weariness was the conviction that he was a weakling. He could not believe that his father, or any of the other choppers, knew tiredness such as his. Sometimes he wondered if he suffered from a wasting disease. He almost hoped that this was so, for then his weakness would be thought less shameful.

With darkness settling around them, they trudged back to the camp. Only pride kept Stephen from throwing himself down as soon as he entered the bunkhouse. Noticing his father's sharp, searching look, he clenched his teeth and straightened.

The men washed their hands and faces in cold water, then filed into the cookhouse. As always the room smelled of fat and boiled tea. The choppers winked at one another as the Polack crossed himself before beginnings on his hard-boiled eggs and fried potatoes.

"Guess the Polack don't trust you," one of the men said to cook.

The cook did not smile. Like most wood cooks, he frowned on conversation at the table. The Polack gave no sign that he heard. Meeting his father's eyes, Stephen grinned guiltily.

When the choppers had finished their desert of stewed pruned and drained their coffee mugs, they shuffled back to the bunkhouse. They sat on benches beside the stove and rolled their after-supper cigarettes. Stephen's father pulled on his mackinaw. "Come out here a minute will you, Stephen?" he growled. "I want you to give me a hand with something."

"Yeah, sure." He leapt to his feet, then looked around in embarrassment; he did not want the men to notice the nervous alacrity with which he responded to his father's commands. After all, he was no little boy to be cowed into obedience. Putting on his windbreaker and cap, he followed his father into the night.

The man stood in the shelter of the tool shed. The world was a maelstrom of darkness and wind.

"I wanted to talk to you alone for a minute."

"Sure."



"You seem to be getting' awful chummy with that Polack," his father declared abruptly.

"Huh?" Stephen gaped in astonishment. The wind striped his back like an alder switch. "He ain't no special friend of mine," he said, not sure whether or not he lied.

"Some of the men's laughin' about him pattin' and pokin' you. I don't like to hear anybody laughin' at my son."

It wasn't true. The Polack did not "pat and poke" him. Then, uneasily, he recalled that the Polack often *did* pinch his cheek or throw an arm across his shoulder. Usually he was only half-aware of these gestures. His father fidgeted when he had to shake hands. But little casual caresses were part of the Polack's speech.

"Them Wops and Bohunks and Polacks has gotta lotta funny ideas. They ain't our kinda people. You gotta watch them."

"Yeah." The wind hurled pellets of frozen snow against his face.

"If he bothers you, let me know and I'll kick the guts outta him."

"Yeah."

"This work ain't too hard for you, is it?"

He wants me to quit, Stephen thought. He wants to shame me into quitting.

"No, it ain't too hard for me. Not by a God damned sight."

"Don't be afraid of hard work. Work never killed nobody."

"No, I guess it never did." Stephen said, shivering.

"Just make that Polack keep his hands off you."

"Yeah."

"I've seen fellers like him before."

"Yeah."

“Well we better go in. It’s cold enough to break the stones.”

Inside, Stephen climbed into his bunk. In a little while the Polack climbed in beside him. Eyeing him dubiously, Stephen edges away until his back pressed against the cold, splintery beams where the wall joined the ceiling. The card players went to their seats by the stove. Before the first game was finished, the Polack fell asleep. The wind howled until Stephen expected it to wrench the roof from the camp. When the Polack began to tremble and moan, Stephen hesitated for a long time before he reached out to wake him.