

THE GREEN SILK GOWN is a 76,000-word, multi-POV, upmarket historical romance, set in San Francisco in the late 1890s. It is similar in theme and tone to Susan Anderson's THE BALLAD OF HATTIE TAYLOR. By harkening back to the nascent feminism of the Gilded Age, THE GREEN SILK GOWN has lessons for today's woman living in a post-Roe world.

The Green Silk Gown

by Sharon Kayne

Chapter 1 • The Flower Shop

San Francisco, 1895

Emily unlocked the front door of the flower shop and locked it again behind her. She preferred to enter through the front; it gave her one less opportunity to see and have to talk to Jonathan. When she entered through the back door, he always managed to be directly in her path and would never move as far out of her way as he should so she could pass him. This made her uncomfortable and Jon seemed to find that amusing. Jon had not always been so brutish with her. In fact, she used to enjoy his company, as he could make her laugh. But Jon had recently made his intention to marry her clear and that had changed everything between them. He was suddenly less respectful of her, as if his offer gave him privileges – and would lead to rights that he was keen to exercise over her now. These days, seeing him always came with a sense of expectation and pressure. Sadly, his offer had been the first and only marriage proposal Emily had ever received. She did not even know any other young men whose offer she would welcome. She was eighteen – an age at which many young women were already wed, some even long enough to have a child or two. And while she was by nature an optimistic person, she could not help but wonder if this might be the only offer she would ever receive. She told herself that was no reason to accept him, but a niggling fear in the back of her mind prompted her to think otherwise. In addition, her father had made it clear he expected her to marry Jon.

This morning Jon was, as usual, in the back room unloading the fresh flowers from the wagon in the alley. Although it was still a bracingly chill spring San Francisco morning, he was in his shirtsleeves, having rolled them up past his elbows. Emily thought he enjoyed showing off his well-muscled arms to her.

“Good morning,” she said, simply as a courtesy.

“You gonna help me unload today or what?” was his curt reply.

Hanging up her coat and pulling on a pinafore apron, Emily stepped out the back door and grabbed some of the smaller containers of flowers. The oak barrels were too heavy to lift, so she left those for Jon. Once inside she remembered that she’d brought an apple for Nic, which she’d left in her coat pocket. She fished it out and went back into the alley where she approached Nic.

“Hello there, sweet boy,” she said as she held out the apple for him, her hand flat. Nic greeted her with a horse snort and took the apple while she stroked his head and long nose. Something caught her eye down the alley a ways. It was the feral cat she had been trying to tame. The cat had been very small when Emily first began feeding it – almost too small to be out on its own. She thought it was fully grown now, but it was still small. Emily had named it Streaks because of the way it would streak away from her when she tried to approach it. The little cat would eat the food Emily left but still would not let Emily get close enough to touch it. Right now, Streaks was yowling and crouching down on her front legs like she was injured.

“Jon,” she called to the delivery man, “I think there’s something wrong with Streaks. She’s sick or something.”

Jon walked over and stood behind Emily – so close that he was nearly touching her. After a moment he laughed. “Oh, she’s all right. She’s just in heat,” he said as though he found her display extremely amusing. Then he raised his right arm up next to Emily’s head so he could point to a wooden fence that ran along the other side of the alley. “See that tom? Watch what he does.”

Emily had a vague notion that being “in heat” meant a cat was going to have kittens – or, in the case of dogs, puppies. She watched as the tomcat jumped down and approached Streaks. The tom joined her in yowling and the two circled each other cautiously before the tom approached her.

Emily gasped in concern when it appeared as though the tomcat was going to attack Streaks.

“What is he doing? Is he going to hurt her?”

Jon answered her with laughter as he and Emily watched the tomcat mount Streaks. “He’s doing just what the good Lord intended,” Jon said. And then he bent down to whisper in Emily’s ear. “And it’s exactly what she’s askin’ him for.”

Emily felt herself blush as she realized what Jon meant. She turned around to go back into the shop, but he was blocking her way, an enormous grin on his face. “Move!” she said as she pushed against his chest. He turned to let her pass but, given how close the wagon was to the building, she was unable to move beyond him without having her skirt brush the front of his trousers.

She stomped back into the shop. Jon could unload the rest of the flowers himself – she was done. She grabbed a pair of pruning shears off of the worktable and began to cut the ends of the flower stems off so she could place them in buckets to be displayed out front.

Emily’s wasn’t entirely certain why her father wanted her to marry Jon – other than that he and Jon got along very well. Her father had been so adamant that Emily felt compelled to promise him she would give the proposal serious consideration. Jon did have some qualities that recommended him. He was fairly handsome, well-built, and a hard worker. But he now took too much for granted – such as the fact that she would marry him – and she found that kind of over-confidence unappealing. He also never treated her as though she was precious to him. She believed a man who truly wants a woman by his side for the rest of his life should treat her as though she was a priceless treasure. That she was as important to him as the very oxygen he breathed. That a life without her would be a half-life. Jon treated her as though all he wanted from her was to have her in his bed. She blushed at the thought, but it was indeed the way he acted toward her. And, as if to confirm that suspicion, his comments to her – like what he’d said in the alley just now – had gotten more and more suggestive since he’d made his intentions clear. Oddly enough, had Jon’s manner toward Emily not changed so drastically she actually would have more seriously considered his offer. As things stood now, she could not imagine ever wanting to accept him.

Jon brought in the rest of the day's flowers without another word. "That's it," he said when he'd brought in the last barrel.

"Good. You can finish trimming these stems for me; it's time to open the shop."

"As your ladyship wishes," he said with false reverence and an exaggerated bow.

Emily ignored him, unlocked the front door, and propped it open. She placed some of yesterday's bouquets onto the shelves that stood in front of the shop. Below them, she placed several tin buckets that held loose flowers. That work completed, she straightened up to check that she had a good selection of loose flowers. Turning around she saw a man standing in the street. He was clearly watching her, but he had what she thought was a curious look on his face.

"Good morning," she greeted him. "What can I help you with?"

"I need flowers," he said as he walked toward her, "but I don't know what kind."

"I find it works best if we start off with you telling me something about the intended recipient," she replied. He gave her a blank look. "Uh, your wife ...?"

"I am unmarried."

"Your sweetheart, perhaps?" she prompted. "Or an ailing aunt or other family member?"

"Oh, no. The flowers aren't for anyone."

"I see," she said, although she'd never had a customer say that before. "They are for you to enjoy yourself, then."

He gave her a short laugh. "Not exactly. I am a painter," he said as if that explained everything satisfactorily. The look on Emily's face indicated that it did not.

"Sorry. I am an artist. Here let me give you my card," he said as he pulled an expensive-looking gold case out of the inside pocket of his coat. He extracted a card and handed it to Emily.

"Edmund Michael," she read aloud. "Portrait artist." An address was printed beneath that in smaller type.

“Yes. Unfortunately, my dealer wants me to paint a still life. They are selling well these days, he tells me.”

“I see,” Emily replied. “If you don’t mind my saying, you don’t seem very pleased with the idea.”

“You are quite astute,” he replied with a smile. “I paint portraits for a reason. The human form and face are where I draw the emotions that I express in my work. No matter how pretty, a bunch of flowers or a pile of fruit cannot relate emotions like love, hope, or sorrow. I’ve no idea why anyone would want to hang such a thing in their home. But my dealer has been quite adamant.”

“Ah. I can see what you mean about fruit, but I am afraid I must disagree with you about flowers,” Emily said. “I believe they reflect a whole range of emotions if you just know how to look at them.”

Edmund laughed. “I can’t imagine you’ve ever had to use that line on a customer to sell flowers before.”

The pleasant expression Emily had shown since she first saw him faded away. “I have not. Because it’s not a line. It’s how I truly see them.”

“I’m so sorry,” Edmund said, his penitence genuine. “Perhaps if you explained to me what you mean.”

Emily took a deep breath. “Flowers are how the plant reproduces. It’s how they pass down their line to future generations.”

Edmund nodded. “True. But cannot the same be said for fruit?”

Emily’s smile returned. “Name me one fruit that does not begin life as a flower.”

He paused and then smiled. “Touché.”

“The flower is how the plant shows itself off to its best advantage; how it attracts the pollinators it needs to reproduce. In that sense, then, you can think of the flower as the lovely lady dressed in her finest ball gown so that she may attract the best suitor.”

“You make an excellent case. I must point out, however, that while an artist can paint the lovely lady simply as a flower of her sex, so to speak, he may also portray her in ways that bring out other qualities. She may be happy and hopeful. Or she may have a look of sorrow; even grief.”

“I will not deny that flowers lack the ability to express actual emotions. Perhaps the artist finds his emotional component by way of which flower he selects to paint.”

Edmund nodded but his expression made it clear he was not entirely convinced.

“There is a whole language to flowers – what they mean not just in and of themselves, but there is a meaning to every aspect: which flowers are presented to whom, when they are given, even how they are given. Come, let me show you,” Emily said as she turned to walk into the store. Stepping behind the small counter she pulled a book from beneath in and opened it.

“This is Kate Greenaway’s book; one of the more popular books when it comes to what each flower represents, but there are others.”

Edmund flipped through the book. “So who has decided which flowers mean what?”

Emily laughed. “That is a good question, and I’m afraid I am unable to answer it. But I imagine much of it comes from folklore. Tradition. Even poetry.”

“Ah, poets,” Edmund replied. “They work with an entirely different canvas. One that has its own set of advantages and disadvantages, I suspect.”

They were silent for a moment, their eyes connected until Emily felt the need to look down.

“So, Mr. Michael,” she said to restart the conversation. “What emotions did you have in mind to portray in your still life?”

Edmund laughed. “None at all until I spoke to you. Tell me, aside from what Kate Greenaway has to say – what emotions do you see in these flowers?” he asked, gesturing to the pots of flowers around them.

“Well, let’s see. Daisies are trustworthy and have nothing to hide,” she said, pointing to a bouquet of them. “They have broad, open faces that seem to smile; they are innocent and without guile. Roses – and most other flowers with close clusters of petals – seem to be

concealing secrets; secrets that are not revealed until the rose has fully opened. By then, its beautiful display is nearly spent.”

“Perhaps that is why they are given to indicate love,” Edmund said.

“Perhaps. Although, I believe a love that is built upon secrets is a love that is doomed to fail.”

“What is your favorite flower, then?”

“Purple iris,” she answered without hesitation.

“Why?”

Emily took a breath to give herself a moment to think. “I’m not entirely sure. Part of it is the color, certainly. But there is also a stateliness to it. And a fine balance.” She pulled one from the closest pail of loose blooms. “The three petals that fold down represent an openness, an acceptance. While the three that rise up speak to me of hope, persistence. But I think it is the balance between the two – or perhaps it is a dichotomy – that I find most appealing; that it can open itself up to what may be, while still striving for ... well, I suppose, something *more*.”

“Much like yourself, perhaps?”

Emily felt her face flush and offered no answer.

“They are a lovely flower,” Edmund said. “Do they last long?”

“They last about as long as any other flower. Certainly longer than roses.”

“And will you have them in stock for a time?”

“Yes. They are just coming into bloom so we should have them until the end of summer.”

“Then iris it shall be,” Edmund declared.

“Good. I believe you will be pleased with your choice.” Emily laid his card on the counter and bent down to the bucket of iris. “How many would you like?” she asked, pulling out what was likely a dozen or so.

“That looks good.”

Emily smiled as she wrapped them up in a piece of butcher paper.

Edmund took a card for the shop out of a holder on the counter. “Miller Flowers. ‘A family business.’ And you are Mrs. Miller, I suppose.”

Emily smiled. “Miss Miller. Miss Emily Miller. The shop is owned by my father.”

“Thank you Miss Emily Miller,” Edmund said as he handed her the coins for the bouquet. “And may I count on seeing you again when I come back to replenish my floral models?”

“I’m in the shop every morning until one o’clock.”

He nodded. “A good day, then,” he said as he quitted the shop. Emily stood for a moment to watch him walk away. Then she realized his card was still sitting on the counter, so she slipped it into the pocket of her apron.

Jon came into the shop from the back room. “Who was that odd fellow?”

“He is an artist. He needed some help selecting flowers for a still life painting.”

“He looked at you like you were the bud he wanted to pluck,” Jon said, his annoyance – not to mention his double-entendre – quite clear.

“Oh really! He was just a customer,” Emily said in exasperation.

He *was* just a customer, but Emily had to admit that she found him a most interesting, even charming man. He was not well dressed; his suit was old and even patched in places. He was not exactly what she would call handsome, but there was something about him that she found very attractive. He was tall, on the thin side, clean-shaven, and had shoulder-length, wavy hair. But he also had a kind face. And beautiful blue eyes. She had never seen such blue eyes before.

Jon, on the other hand, was shorter – although still taller than Emily – and very broad shouldered and well-muscled. As she considered the two men’s physiques, she realized that each was well suited to the nature of their job; Jon had to be strong while Mr. Michael had to be agile. Being a painter also meant having the disposition that allowed him to sit still for hours with a tiny brush in his hands. Jon, on the other hand, clearly enjoyed the brutish nature of his

job. Mr. Michael was also what Emily would characterize as genteel. Jon, on the other hand, had an abrasive manner. She laughed inwardly at herself for comparing the two men. Jon was here and had offered her his hand. The artist was someone she would likely never see again.

* * * *

Edmund looked for a vase once he got back to his studio. He had several – they made good props for portraits – but he was not certain he had one that would work well with the iris. Finally, he found a tall green one that would suffice, filled it with water, and set it on the table where his still life would be staged. He had purchased a variety of fruit as well, but he could not come up with an arrangement that he liked in counterpoint to the flowers. He did not, however, want to simply paint a vase of flowers; the composition needed something to draw the eye away from the vase. He tried laying a few of the iris on their side in front of the vase, but their shape did not allow them to lay gracefully. Then he laid a few books in front of the vase and propped two single stems on the books so their blooms stood up at an angle. He was pleased with the dynamic created by the diagonal line, but the composition still lacked something; something small, off to the side to counterbalance the books. He went back to his fruit and chose a small bunch of grapes. He set those on a plate next to the vase and then laid his pocket watch on the table in the foreground. Then he took a few of the iris out of the vase and cut their stems so they would sit lower; in front of the other flowers. Once he had arranged them to his liking, he had a composition he could work with. He would still rather be painting a portrait, but his dislike for this project had been significantly mollified.

As he sat behind his easel to sketch the scene, he found his mind kept drifting back to the lovely young woman at the flower shop. She had caught his eye before they'd even spoken. She did not appear to be a beauty in the classical sense at first – but the more they spoke, the more he warmed to her appearance. She had a round face, ivory skin, and a freckle or two. He found many of her features extremely compelling – not least of which were her gleaming green eyes and her rich red hair, which he imagined was a thick and long mane when it was loose. And her smile transformed her face from the everyday to the extraordinary. It did not hurt that she had deliciously full lips that were a dark pink next to her creamy skin. They were the kind of lips a

man could lose himself in. She was shorter than the average woman and looked to have a voluptuous figure, the thought of which made his heart beat a bit faster. She was from a very different background than he was; clearly working class, although she spoke well. He suspected she read a great deal.

Edmund's sister had given him a rich, green ball gown, which he planned to use for his next portrait, and he imagined how well this young woman would look in it. He already had a model in mind for the next canvas, but he had not made her an offer, so he was free to find someone else. Would the lovely woman from the flower shop be amenable to sitting for a portrait? She looked to be of age so she should be able to sit without her parents' approval. The more he thought about her, the more certain he became that she was the perfect subject.

He sighed and tried to clear his mind so he could concentrate on the task at hand. Then he remembered what she had said about the iris – what they meant to her and what she saw in them. He found he could see the same properties in them as she did, and this made sketching them much more appealing. He realized that if he thought about them the way she did, this still life could actually express something deeper than he had imagined possible. He also found that thinking about her as he sketched gave his work an intensity it otherwise would have lacked. He stopped trying to push her image from his mind and gave over to whatever spell she had seemed to cast on him.

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Jonathan Brown liked his job. He liked that it allowed him to see Emily every morning and that it kept him strong. And he liked that it usually gave him his afternoons free to do whatever he wanted, which generally included drinking beer with his friends. And, on occasion, bare-knuckle boxing when he wanted to earn extra money. This particular morning had been quite interesting. He smiled at the thought that Miss Emily Miller did not know about the mating habits of alley cats. Once he made her his wife, he would teach her a thing or two about mating. This morning had been marred by one thing, though. That strange customer. Emily had said he was a painter as if that was something to be admired. Jon did not care if he had painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel – not that he had any idea what the Sistine Chapel was or what

was painted on its ceiling – he did not like the way the man had looked at his fiancé. While Emily had not yet accepted Jon’s marriage proposal, he thought of her as his fiancé. He expected she would accept him in time. Between himself and her father, the pressure would eventually wear her down to the point that acceptance would be the only option she could imagine. Once she had a ring on her finger, men like that artist would think twice about looking at her like she was there for the taking.

Jon thought back to when Albert Miller had first suggested that Jon marry his daughter. Jon had laughed and said, “I’m not really the marrying kind.”

To which Albert had said, “Wait. Hear me out, my boy.” Once Albert had explained what else Jon would get in the bargain, he’d decided it was not a bad deal. Emily was attractive enough, and she had plenty of padding in all the right places. If he was going to tie himself to one woman, it would never be to some skinny girl. The thought of having Emily – of being the man who ruptured her maidenhead – aroused him. Marriage would mean that she would eventually give of herself to babies, of course, but that was simply the way of things. He would still be able to have her whenever it pleased him, and that was what mattered.

After Jon finished unhooking Nic from the wagon rigging and taking care of the horse, he bid the stable boy a good day. Since he had no deliveries to make in the afternoon, he went off to enjoy the rest of his day. Today he might just visit a prostitute. The business with the alley cats was still on his mind and it put him in the mood for pleasure.

* * * *

Albert Miller had finished balancing the books – his usual morning routine. Next he would visit the bank and then the warehouse where the flower growers sold to the shop keepers. He would pay them and place tomorrow’s order. Today he also had to visit the landlord to pay rent for the shop for the next month. This was his least favorite task, as he disliked the man and the fact that he had something to hold over Albert. But, once done with that, he was free to relax until early evening when he’d return to the flower shop and close out the till. He no longer spent time in the shop dealing with customers. He’d never liked that aspect of the business and his two daughters, Beth and Emily – and in a few years their younger sister Alice – handled that

part adequately. He looked forward to the day when he could hand off the financial work to Jon. The young man was not yet responsible enough to be trusted with large sums of money, but once he was married to Emily and set to inherit the shop, Albert expected that he would take things more seriously.

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